

February 2024

Television



ITV's *Breathtaking*
**Heroism and
heartache**



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From the CEO



Our new National Events season got off to a spectacular start in late January, with standing room only for “2024 TV predictions: an expert view on the year ahead”. Many thanks to all the panellists, and don’t miss our report inside.

At the event, there was a lot of talk about how the crisis for TV freelancers is likely to develop in 2024. In this issue, Simon Bucks gauges the impact of the production slowdown across different parts of the UK.

This month’s cover story is ITV’s searing drama *Breathhtaking*, which takes us into Covid wards as health workers struggled to cope with the terrifying

challenge of caring for patients during the pandemic. The drama is based on doctor-writer Rachel Clarke’s memoir of the crisis, adapted for television by her and erstwhile junior doctors Jed Mercurio and Prasanna Puwanarajah.

Also in February’s *Television* is Steve Clarke’s profile of the BBC’s new Chair, Samir Shah, who starts work at Broadcasting House this month. We at the RTS wish him well.

By a happy coincidence, our TV diarist is Trevor Phillips. Trevor began his TV career as a researcher working at London Weekend Television alongside Samir on *Skin*, a series aimed at black Londoners, and the first programme made by LWT’s London Minorities Unit.

Carole Solazzo examines the

sometimes fraught relationship between writers and producers and offers some advice on the best way for these two vital elements in the scripted production chain to work together.

Everyone loves a good Home Counties murder mystery. Shilpa Ganatra gets the inside story on *The Marlow Murder Club*, commissioned by UKTV’s Drama channel.

Finally, I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at the RTS Television Journalism Awards later this month.

Theresa Wise

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RTS NATIONAL EVENT

KEYNOTE ADDRESS AND Q&A

Philippa Childs

Head of BECTU



19 February

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As many freelancers in television consider leaving an industry with precarious employment prospects, Philippa Childs shares her reflections on the 'perfect storm' of events that led to the industry's abrupt standstill in 2023 and addresses what the UK's primary union for non-performing workers is doing to encourage a healthier, more sustainable future for its 40,000+ members.

She considers what improved support mechanisms for freelancers could look like, and the need for an industry-led strategy to meaningfully tackle the sector's pressing challenges.

She will also reflect on the sector's ongoing challenges in addressing bullying and harassment and how unions can help drive progress in ensuring the sector is a mentally healthy place to work.

TV diary

Over the New Year, a big birthday, celebrated by a return to my childhood home, Guyana. We spent a week in the rainforest, among the red howler monkeys, screaming pihas and spectacled caiman. Under the canopy, it's a noisy, hostile environment, mostly populated by wild pigs, giant snakes and spiteful, buzzing insects. The gag about my Sunday-morning job interviewing politicians writes itself.

■ In the Arawak language, Guyana means “land of many waters”. The country’s most magnificent rivers rise in the Brazilian savannah, where you can still see *vaqueros* on horseback rounding up vast herds of cattle.

Few who live there need to watch David Attenborough’s wonderful programmes to feel the magic. They can just step out of their front door.

■ The Essequibo region is bigger than England and is once again being claimed by Venezuela’s bandit regime, no doubt to distract attention from the fact that a nation with the largest oil reserves in the world manages to starve its people.

I was reassured by schoolfriends, now in government, that, in the event of an invasion, I was unlikely to be conscripted. I was torn between relief and indignation. No one wants to be shot, even in defence of the motherland; but, come on, they don’t have to make it quite so obvious that they think you’re past it.

■ I was born in London. Like many Caribbean-heritage children of my generation who were just an extra



Paul Hampartsoumian

Trevor Phillips returns to Guyana, where the locals are less than reverential about his TV career back in Britain

mouth to feed, I was packed off “home” to what was then British Guiana before I could walk.

Growing up in a country with no TV industry, then or now, I missed many of the 20th century’s iconic TV moments: Neil Armstrong stepping on to the moon’s surface, the launch of *News at Ten* and the first sight of colour TV.

When I returned for university, in 1971, it took me weeks to work out that other students’ frequent mentions of Doug and Dinsdale Piranha were a reference to the *Monty Python* parody of the Kray twins.

Where I come from, these fish rarely receive pet names; the pirai, which is what we call the black piranha, can, it is said, strip the flesh from a cow in seconds. Wild swimming is never going to catch on.

■ Guyanese at home are proud of their many sons and daughters abroad but they can’t resist the temptation to mock us. Last time I was in Georgetown, the Mayor stopped by the restaurant where I was having lunch with some of my sisters to congratulate me on the “wonderful things I was doing in England”.

He urged me to stay involved in politics “in England”. In other words, don’t for one second imagine you can come back and tell us what to do, English boy.

■ Social media and YouTube enable Caribbean people to keep a sharp eye on the diaspora’s doings. A senior politician greeted me with a chuckle: “Love your show on Sky. Shame that you missed out on the Starmer interview yesterday. Never mind, Wilf Frost did an excellent job!” Twist the knife, why don’t you?

■ I returned to *Sunday morning...* on Sky News to learn that the builders are at our Millbank studio and we’d been turfed out to Osterley in west London. I like the Skyberia campus – it’s one of the few places where the Waitrose store imagines the standard snack for studio crew includes quails’ eggs with truffle mayonnaise.

But it’s a long way to go for politicians rooted in SW1. However, grumble as we might, I think it’s wise to concede defeat when battling for territory with a combo far more terrifying to politicians than anything the Venezuelans could ever muster: Sophy Ridge and Kay Burley.

Trevor Phillips is a Times columnist, chairs Index on Censorship and hosts Sky News’s Sunday Morning with Trevor Phillips.

COMFORT CLASSIC

Steve Clarke revels in a radical hit that gloried in women of a certain age in glamorous 1990s careers behaving badly

These days, TV comedies created and written by women, and starring a predominantly female cast, are rightly everywhere. It wasn't always like that, especially in the UK where, not that long ago, female characters in sitcoms were often typecast as the butt of male jokes and relegated to the stock roles of sexpot, nagging wife or harridan mother-in-law.

Jennifer Saunders changed that with her breakthrough comedy *Absolutely Fabulous*, first shown on BBC Two in November 1992, before the series was quickly promoted to BBC One. Even today, *Ab Fab*, as it soon became known, sends out a manic energy that still feels fresh and wonderfully unbridled in our more culturally complicated times, dominated as they are by identity politics and the ever-present risk of social media abuse.

Think of Victoria Wood on acid and you're not far off *Ab Fab*. Appropriately, its theme song is Julie Driscoll and Ade Edmondson's psychedelic rendering of Bob Dylan's obscure *This Wheel's on Fire*.

The show ran for six series between 1992 and 2012, spawning a belated feature film in 2016. Saunders stars as fashion PR mogul Edina Monsoon. Joanna Lumley is her sidekick, magazine fashion director Patsy Stone, who eggs Eddie on to ever greater folly. Their pairing made such an impact that Eddie and Patsy lookalikes were familiar sights at gatherings on both sides of the Atlantic. The costumes were glorious and make Elton John look underdressed.

Casting these two as middle-aged hedonists struggling to keep up with their younger peers was pure genius. It almost didn't happen. *Ab Fab's* genesis was "Modern Mother and Daughter", a sketch from the TV series *French and*



BBC

Saunders, in which Dawn French played the sensible, upstanding daughter to Saunders' debauched mother who acts like a teenager.

When the idea emerged to develop the sketch into a sitcom, French was due to play the Patsy character, but she had to pull out when she and her then husband, Lenny Henry, were given the opportunity to adopt a child.

Ruby Wax, script editor on *Absolutely Fabulous*, suggested Lumley for the role instead. After a shaky start (according to Lumley, she and Saunders took a while to gel), the pair ignited to become one of the greatest-ever sitcom double acts.

Their energy bears comparison to *The Young Ones* at its best, hardly surprising since both shows have their roots in the comedy troupe known as The Comic

Ear candy

The Rest Is Entertainment

Strip, a Soho cabaret much sought out by Hollywood stars and TV types in the post-punk London of the 1980s.

Saunders and Lumley's physical comedy is superb. The one-liners come thick and fast as Saunders' wit skewers what we would nowadays call celebrity culture. "Meg Ryan a movie star? I'll be the judge of that," snaps Patsy in between swigs from a bottle of Smirnoff blue-label vodka.

The cast was fleshed out with nimble performances from June Whitfield as Edina's parasitic mother and Julia Sawalha as her sensible daughter, Saffy, plus more star guests than Donald Trump has court cases. Helena Bonham Carter, Jo Brand, Debbie Harry, Elton John, and Twiggy were among those who appeared in the show. That is just the tip of the star-dusted iceberg.

The world of celebrity excess was the target of Saunders' gloriously camp satire, but the celebrities couldn't wait to rub shoulders with the absurdly over-the-top Edina and Patsy.

In interviews, Saunders often revealed that she found writing difficult. In a recent edition of BBC One's *Imagine*, which took a panoramic look at the careers of French and Saunders, Alan Yentob provided some fresh insight into the *Ab Fab* writing process.

Saunders claimed writing *Ab Fab* was easy because there was so much of her in Edina's character. Producer Jon Plowman begged to differ as he showed Yentob skeletal scripts that would often be left to the very last minute to be fleshed out.

Asked the secret of *Ab Fab*'s longevity, Saunders suggested it was down to the characters evolving in front of our eyes. In series 3, there is evidence of growing maturity as Patsy considers being screened for breast cancer and Edina admits that she was never as promiscuous as her daughter was led to believe.

That, however, is not the way we will remember these supercharged pleasure seekers who still light up our screens more than three decades after they first appeared. ■

Absolutely Fabulous is on BritBox and Hulu.

Back in his footballing prime, Gary Lineker made scoring goals look so easy that he was often ignorantly accused of "goal hanging". Seemingly destined to breeze through any line of work that tickles his fancy, after nonchalantly mastering the art of TV presenting, Lineker is now doing the same with podcast producing. The name of his production company? Goalhanger.

I'm sure it was brainstormed with tongue in cheek but, after commandeering the topics of history, politics, money, football and now entertainment, Goalhanger's ever-expanding *The Rest Is...* franchise is threatening to consume the entire top 10 on the podcast chart.

And if you'll allow me to exhaust the analogy, it has succeeded so far by generally adhering to a tactic as simple and effective as goal hanging: sticking two nerds in a room and handing them microphones.

And who better than the vast cultural sponges Marina Hyde and Richard Osman to be their entertainment nerds? *The Guardian*'s fiercely witty columnist of both politics and showbiz, and the gameshow guru/king of crime fiction, instantly slipped into the snappiest of grooves in their analysis of "all the fun things you escape to", as Hyde puts it.

If that sounds like an impossibly broad scope, let me reassure you that, bar some extreme *One Show*-esque gear changes, there are no signs that they've spread themselves too thin.

It is the strongest virtue of the show that they can cover anything. The range

extends from the near-triumph of our newfound national treasure Luke Littler in the World Darts Championship, to the strange allure that the late US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger held for Hollywood stars. All delivered with the same level of enthusiastic insight.

An endearing quirk of Osman's is that he seems to view everything through the lens of TV formats. In their discussion of darts' dominance of the over-

night TV ratings, the former *Pointless* host was busy pitching the sport as if it were his next hit gameshow.

"It's the single best television sport," he said, because "it's the best format there is." It's three games in each set and, coupled with the fact that you

must finish a game on a double (the hardest shot), "it's all jeopardy".

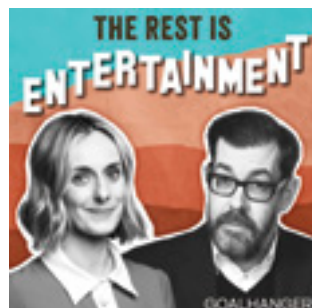
Hyde on Kissinger's favourite pastime of "star-fucking" led to the kind of hilarious takedown we've long been reading in her *Guardian* columns.

In 2007, Kissinger invited Angelina Jolie to join the Council on Foreign Relations, simply because it was his only chance to meet her. "The blackest of satires," said Hyde, because "what have they got in common? She's just adopted a Cambodian orphan and he certainly created a few of them."

There are so many golden nuggets like these in each circa-40-minute episode that it's hard to digest them all in one listen. You can hear why they seized the top spot as soon as the podcast launched at the end of 2023. I don't see them leaving the top 10 any time soon.

Meanwhile, Gary Lineker can't stop scoring. ■

Harrison Bennett



Goalhanger

WORKING LIVES



Chief programming officer

Steve North is responsible for the editorial direction and programming of UKTV's channels. In his 20-plus years at the broadcaster, he has led the rebrand of UKTV's comedy channel to Dave, brought the huge hit *Taskmaster* to our screens and revived a childhood favourite, *Red Dwarf*. He also manages the combined BBC Studios and UKTV global compliance team.

What does the job involve?

Setting the editorial direction of the business so we can create distinctive, original, creative, enjoyable channels at UKTV that viewers want to watch.

Do you use gut instinct or data?

Research plays an enormous part – you can't underplay its importance. When you go in to see a board of directors and tell them you want to

rename a channel Dave, if you haven't got a lot of research to back up why that's a good idea, it's not going to happen. We spoke to more than 2,000 people to make sure we were not making a huge error.

Which departments do you work with closely?

I work with our commissioning and acquisitions teams to decide which shows to make and buy; marketing and PR to publicise those shows; the operations team and platform providers to get our channels to air; finance to ensure we have the money to pay for the programmes; and legal to make sure everything's above board.

What skills do you need?

An analytical brain so you can understand figures and follow trends;

a passion for TV; and a willingness to learn, because TV is changing at such an obscene rate.

You also need the composure to take a step back, particularly when making editorial decisions about what we should or shouldn't put on air – time to think and digest, and assess potential pitfalls is vital. And you need to listen to and trust people – I may be responsible for the channels' editorial direction, but I don't make the programmes.

You've worked as a scheduler – is that the normal route into programming?

It's quite a well-worn route. Scheduling puts you at the heart of the business – you have to work with every department and it helps to develop your analytical skills. You can also come from a commissioning or acquisitions background, where you've spent

a lot of time working with content. Marketing, too, because you really need to understand what audiences want.

You also work in content compliance – what does that involve?

Ensuring our programmes adhere to Ofcom regulations and to BBC standards, practices and producer guidelines. There's a lot of content: the UKTV channels, UKTV Play catch-up and the global services of BBC Studios.

We also need to make sure that the language and any violence or drug use in the shows is suitable for the time of day they're going out.

On top of that, although content may be compliant with all the regulations in any given country, there are also editorial considerations. Is it right to air a particular programme in the wake of a natural disaster, terrorist activity or the death of a famous person?

Do the two roles fit well together?

Other chief programming officers have compliance as part of their job. The two make us responsible for every element of the content going on screen, so they fit together well.

What shows are you most proud of bringing to UKTV?

I was a big *Red Dwarf* fan as a child, so making fresh episodes of that for Dave was incredible. *Taskmaster* was a huge success for us and now for Channel 4 – a brilliant show, so creative, so different.

We also brought back *The Comic Strip* to Gold; working with British comedy royalty Ade Edmondson, Rik Mayall, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, was incredible.

More recently, we've been making great drama for Alibi, such as *Traces* and *Annika*, and fantastic shows such as *Bangers and Cash* on Yesterday and *Emma Willis: Delivering Babies* on W.

Do you have to be more innovative as a broadcaster?

We're not the biggest player, so we have to find gaps in the market and ways of appealing to audiences that aren't straight out of the mainstream.

It's really difficult for us to do what the big channels do better than them, because they have more money; we have to be creative and take risks.

We have a new show coming up on Dave this year called *Battle in the Box*, a comedy entertainment show hosted by Jimmy Carr that feels fresh and out there.

What do you bring to work with you?

Laptop, notebook, the reading glasses I now need and a reusable coffee cup.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

The best is launching new channels; the worst is the few seconds when you've clicked on the overnights to see if a show has worked and you're waiting for the numbers.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to do your job?

Gain as much experience as you can. Particularly when you're starting out, you don't need to stay in every role

a bit of pay-TV. Getting content to people is much more complicated now: you have YouTube and TikTok; streamers such as Netflix and Amazon Prime; and the broadcaster VoD players; as well as many more channels. Audience tastes are constantly changing, too.

Are there old shows you can't now put on air?

Yes, sometimes either lines need to be edited out or a programme can't be transmitted at all. But there is a balance to be found between not offending an audience and censorship.

I don't see myself as a censor of



for five years. Try to work in drama, comedy and factual because the audiences are different and, in my job, you need to be able to understand what audiences want. TV is an incredibly creative industry; it's a real privilege – make the most of it and enjoy it. You've also got to work hard because it is so competitive: a lot of people want your job and you've got to work hard to prove yourself.

Has your job changed over the past two decades?

Totally. When I was starting out, there were just a few linear channels and

content and I'm not here to pretend that the past hasn't happened, but an audience does need context. We spend a lot of time considering what is and isn't suitable to play – should we transmit a show with a warning or after the watershed or not at all?

Is there any type of channel you would love to launch?

A sports channel, which would allow me to travel the world following golf tournaments, football, rugby and cricket. ■

Steve North was interviewed by Matthew Bell.



Breathtaking

Fighting Covid on the frontline

Four years ago, the UK identified its first cases of a new, highly infectious disease. Within two months, Covid-19 had claimed the lives of thousands of people and the country found itself in an eerie lockdown.

Behind closed hospital doors, the scene was very different: it was one of chaos, as an unprepared and overwhelmed health service struggled to keep people alive.

In ITV's new factual drama *Breathtaking*, three writers – NHS doctor Rachel Clarke and former doctors Prasanna Puwanarajah and Jed Mercurio – take the British public for the first time into a closed Covid ward. It is a harrowing but necessary watch.

The drama's source material is Clarke's book *Breathtaking*, a searing

Breathtaking finds heroism and humanity as well as horror in the UK's Covid wards. **Matthew Bell** reports

account of life on a Covid ward that began as a personal diary during the pandemic's first wave in spring 2020.

"With the drama, I wanted to honour the bravery of the staff I worked with and the courage of the patients I cared for, many of whom died; the dignity of the families who did obey the rules, who didn't party in 10 Downing Street, who had to sit at home on a Zoom call while I held up an iPad to their loved one who was dying," Clarke says.

"I wasn't writing for public consumption to begin with; I was literally writing a diary for myself because it was a really traumatic experience. I find it therapeutic writing things down," she tells *Television*.

That all changed when news broke in May 2020 that Boris Johnson's senior adviser, Dominic Cummings, had driven to County Durham, breaching lockdown rules. "I was incensed. For the past couple of months, I'd been surrounded by people who had followed the rules at enormous cost to themselves," she says. "I realised what I had been writing was important – I had been witness to the truth of what was really happening inside hospitals."

Clarke started writing the book that first summer of Covid, "fast and furiously... heavily fuelled by a big glass of wine."

Puwanarajah met Clarke more than 15 years ago when she was a medical student and he was working as an NHS doctor in Oxford. “We stayed in touch and were talking about adapting another book of hers when the pandemic struck,” he says.

By then, Puwanarajah had left medicine, building a career in theatre (acting and writing for the National Theatre), film (his directorial debut, *Ballywalter*, was released last year) and as a TV actor (he recently played Martin Bashir in *The Crown*).

Puwanarajah had worked before with Mercurio, as an actor in his medical drama *Critical* and *Line of Duty*, and co-authored a graphic novel, *Sleeper*, with him.

“When I introduced Rachel to Jed, there was a real sense that we could put something together. The spine of [the drama] is Rachel’s book *Breath-taking*, but Rachel and I also pulled together testimonies from other health-care professionals... then we invented characters to crash all of these stories into,” he says. “*Breath-taking* uses character composites and the dramatisation of journalistically sourced material, rather than fictionalisation.”

The drama’s main protagonist is acute medicine consultant Dr Abbey Henderson, played by Golden Globe-winning actress Joanne Froggatt. Clarke says: “In many ways, Abbey is me: her reactions to what unfolds, her growing sense of anger and her desire to do something about that.”

She and Puwanarajah worked on the scripts for the three-part drama, which chronicles the pandemic from the very first Covid cases to the devastating second wave in January 2021, fuelled by a new variant and Christmas socialising.

“When we were happy with each script, Jed did a revision of his own, which, in typical Jed style, was very efficient in terms of word count, but sharpened what we were doing,” says Puwanarajah.

Clarke and Puwanarajah believe in television’s enduring power to change history, pointing to the extraordinary political impact of *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, which forced a hitherto reluctant government to say it would quash the convictions of hundreds of sub-postmasters.

“I was a TV documentary-maker before I became a doctor,” says Clarke, so I know how powerful a story unfolding on screen can be. “There ▶



Realism on the Covid ward

“We were striving to achieve a level of authenticity [without] dramatic embellishments; we had to present a story that was honest,” says *Breath-taking*’s director, Craig Viveiros.

“Rachel, Prasanna and Jed’s script was amazing... I felt like I was in a war zone, on the frontline, which was exactly their intention.”

Before the shoot, Viveiros ‘steered clear of watching medical dramas because I didn’t want to fall into those tropes... no other medical drama could compare to *Breath-taking*... I had a look at war dramas; being on the [Covid] frontline, feeling you’re overworked and under-resourced is similar to being in a war zone.’

Medical staff, extras and cast spent a week at a boot camp before the six-week shoot to prepare ‘the major medical scenes; that’s not just the main actors but any porters or additional staff needed to manage a procedure. On my many visits to hospitals for research, I realised how many members of staff are required to deal with a medical issue. What you often see in medical dramas is one doctor and a nurse dealing with everything.’

Designer Ashleigh Jeffers built a set in just three weeks inside a disused university building at Jordanstown outside Belfast, which enabled Viveiros to move ‘freely throughout the space... allowing the camera to naturally catch what’s going on’.

Takes were frequently long and complex to reflect the chaos of the Covid ward. ‘I wanted the drama to seem fluid... we were running real-time sequences together for 10 to 12 minutes, which meant we were co-ordinating up to 70 to 100 people [at a time].’

The production employed a medical team, principally Dr Thom Petty and Dr Andrew Cinnamond, to ensure clinical processes were accurate. ‘We always had three medical advisers on set at any one time,’ said Viveiros, ‘Jed and Prasanna were on set, too, so we often had five medical heads in the room.’

‘The level of medical specificity had to be so fine. One of the things Rachel, Jed, Prasanna and I all agreed on was about terrible medical dramas from the past. To favour melodrama over authenticity was something we were never prepared to do – [we wanted] a clear and straight telling of the story.’

► has been a lot of talk post-*Mr Bates* about why it has taken an ITV drama to make people care – the answer is that telling a story well on the screen is the way to capture the hearts and imaginations of the public.”

Puwanarajah adds: “It’s heartening when you see a nation pull together and say we want justice to be done. But we’re a long way off that, post-Covid.”

Breathtaking may provide the impetus. Viewers see in graphic, documentary detail the distress of health professionals, patients and their relatives, and are not spared harrowing deaths. There is also fury at the impossible working conditions medical staff

or staff. Overwhelmingly, people were courageous, dignified and kind.”

Is Puwanarajah concerned that some viewers will find it too tough to sit through? “I fully expect that there will be people who won’t want to be taken back. The level of national mental and spiritual injury from Covid is just colossal.

“But if we had made a programme that everybody felt they would be able to watch, we probably wouldn’t have ended up asking hard enough questions.”

As the Covid inquiry continues to show, there is no consensus on either the errors made during the pandemic



Jed Mercurio and Craig Viveiros on set

ITV

had to endure, largely the result of the Government’s inadequate response to the pandemic. To drive home the point, the drama is peppered with archive footage of the folly of Boris Johnson and his ministers.

Clarke makes no apologies: “To this day, I seethe with rage about the lies that were propagated to the British public about the pandemic. Matt Hancock sitting before the TV cameras saying he had thrown a protective ring around care homes and that there were no national problems with PPE when we had nurses in our hospital dying because they couldn’t get proper equipment.”

Breathtaking, though, offers more than polemic, it also presents a hugely optimistic view of people’s bravery and generosity in the most awful of circumstances.

“It felt incredibly important to show the light as well as the bleakness of that time,” says Clarke. “I was surrounded by people who were displaying the absolute best of humanity, whether they were patients, relatives

or the lessons to take from it. Incredibly, there are still many who deny the very existence of Covid-19.

Clarke says: “Four years down the line, we now inhabit a world where lots of people, including some MPs, argue ferociously that the lockdowns did more harm than good. That is just terrifying misinformation – about 230,000 people died of Covid, even with lockdowns. I can’t bear to think what the number would have been like without [them].

“Disinformation, Covid-deniers and anti-vaxxers who want you to believe that the pandemic was a ‘scamdemic’, that Covid was no worse than the common cold, that hospitals were empty... those individuals are disgraceful and spreading dangerous disinformation.

“This is a public interest drama... you might not want to look at this, you might want to move on... But we need to look at it and remember, in order to do things differently and better next time – because there will be another pandemic.” ■

Doctors of literature

There is a long tradition of literary doctors, from Keats, Conan Doyle and Chekhov through to Khaled Hosseini, author of modern classic *The Kite Runner*.

British TV is a home for medics: *The Good Karma Hospital*’s Dan Sefton, *This Is Going to Hurt*’s Adam Kay and *Malpractice*’s Grace Ofori-Attah – and the three writers behind *Breathtaking*, Jed Mercurio, Prasanna Puwanarajah and Rachel Clarke, who continues to practice in palliative care.

Before qualifying as a doctor in 2009, Clarke worked as a TV current affairs journalist; subsequently, she penned a bestselling memoir about life as a junior doctor, *Your Life in My Hands*.

‘It’s not by chance that a lot of doctors have become writers and vice versa,’ says Clarke. ‘Writers, journalists and doctors are fascinated by people.

‘At the heart of being a good doctor is, strangely, storytelling; paying attention to the story that the patient in front of you is telling and interpreting that story. Sometimes it’s about conveying a story to the patient. That involves listening intently with empathy and building trust.

‘A good doctor is endlessly curious about people because the patient is not a constellation of diseases; a patient is a human being and, if you don’t care about your patient as a human being, you will not be a good, empathetic, healing doctor. All those skills, which are often neglected in medical school, are also the skills of being a good writer.’

***Breathtaking*, made by Jed Mercurio’s production company, HTM Television, airs on ITV1 on 19, 20 and 21 February.**

The new man in the hot seat



Steve Clarke
profiles
Samir Shah,
the incoming
Chair of
the BBC

PA Media

Samir Shah may not be the most politically well-connected of BBC Chairs or have the experience of running a large-scale organisation, but his broadcasting and television credentials are impeccable.

He is also the organisation's first Chair of colour and, whereas recent BBC leaders such as Gavyn Davies, David Clementi and Richard Sharp all had successful careers in the City before being given the BBC job, the new Chair's background is

steeped in television journalism.

There is nothing patrician or entitled about Shah who, in a TV career spanning five decades as a highly regarded producer of current affairs and documentaries, appears to have made few enemies. "Samir is not the sort of person who pisses people off or who makes them angry," notes broadcaster Trevor Phillips, a friend and colleague for almost 45 years.

The two of them began their TV careers together as researchers at London Weekend Television's (LWT) London Minorities Unit, working on

Skin, a pioneering programme for and about black Londoners.

People who know Shah well say that his forensic, evidence-based approach to journalism and ideas per se was instilled in him by John Birt, then LWT's programme chief, whose "mission to explain" philosophy was implemented in programmes such as *Weekend World*, the in-depth political interview series hosted by the late Brian Walden.

"You could see this approach very much on display during Samir's recent Select Committee Hearing," ►

► says Lord Hall, the former BBC Director-General who, as the corporation's Director of News, was Shah's boss at the BBC. "Samir is not someone who ever jumps to conclusions. He will always examine the evidence first. That is one of his strengths."

Asked about Gary Lineker's tweets on the Government's plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, and whether they had broken BBC guidelines, Shah's reply was measured. He suggested it was a "perfectly proper thing for the board to ask the executive whether the new guidelines have achieved their intention. It may well be that they need to review them again."

Before joining LWT, Shah had worked briefly as an academic; his full title is Dr Samir Shah after taking a DPhil from St Catherine's College, Oxford, where he studied a subject close to home, "Aspects of the geographic analysis of Asian immigrants in London".

He was born in 1952 in Aurangabad, India. The family moved to England



Open University

Peter Horrocks

'SAMIR ALWAYS HAD THIS ICONOCLASTIC APPROACH, ESPECIALLY ON RACE'

when he was eight. Shah went to Latymer Upper School in west London, before reading geography at the University of Hull. One of his early intellectual interests was the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. He is a devoted Manchester United fan, a regular visitor to Old Trafford and enjoys good food and good company. His half brother, Mohit Bakaya, is Director, Speech Audio at BBC Radio 4.

Shah lives in Chelsea, south-west London and is married to Belkis Bhegani, a former journalist on *Broadcast* magazine who these days helps run Juniper, the independent production company Shah bought in 1997 from Michael Wills, when Wills was first elected as a Labour MP.

Belkis also writes questions for TV quiz shows. The couple have one son, Cimran, who is a commissioning editor in Channel 4's entertainment department. *The Last Leg* is among his commissions.

When, in 1987, Birt, then BBC Director-General, hired Shah as the broadcaster's Head of Current Affairs, bringing in a much-needed ally from his old company, LWT, there was uproar from the old guard. They hated the idea of an ITV man (LWT was the weekend London ITV franchise) running such a key part of the BBC's journalism. "They regarded him as one of Birt's stormtroopers, but it wasn't long before they recognised that he, like them, was dedicated to making high-quality programmes," says former *Newsnight* editor Peter Horrocks. "Samir was actually very similar to the people who were already working at the BBC."

At the BBC, he launched several new political shows, including Sunday lunchtime's *On the Record*, presented by Jonathan Dimbleby, among others. As a BBC executive recalls, colleagues soon realised that, despite his intellectual gifts, he possessed a keen sense of fun. "Samir might have been employed by John Birt but, behind his back, he wasn't above gently teasing him," recalls one.

In the run-up to his recent Select Committee hearing in which MPs interrogated him following his appointment as "the preferred candidate", friends warned him: "Don't crack jokes. This is a serious business."

"Samir understands programme

making," says Lord Hall. "To have a Chair who understands that creative process and what it is that sets the BBC apart is a huge asset.

"He's also worked outside the BBC. Having that insider/outsider perspective on the BBC is very important because it's a city state. Samir will bring a sense of perspective in spades to the BBC."

Not since Michael Grade held the post from 2004 to 2006 has the job been occupied by an editorial figure. In at least one way, however, Shah is unique. "Samir is the only BBC Chair who's ever experienced racism," notes Pat Younge, the independent producer



Sky

Trevor Phillips

'SAMIR IS A PROPER INTELLECTUAL. BIG BRAIN AND RIGOROUS TO A PAIN-IN-THE-ARSE DEGREE'

who worked for Shah at the BBC when he was running the corporation's political programmes in the mid-1990s.

"He is a proper intellectual," says Phillips. "Big brain, thorough and rigorous to a pain-in-the-arse degree. He is the kind of executive producer who will not let anyone leave the room until

6:00am, when we've solved the puzzle.

"It could be something as detailed as where to put the semicolon in a script. That makes him sound tiresome, but he isn't. He's incredible fun to work with."

Younge adds: "Samir is uniquely qualified for chairing the BBC. He's worked at broadcasters other than the



Public domain

Lord Hall

'SAMIR IS NOT SOMEONE WHO EVER JUMPS TO CONCLUSIONS. HE WILL ALWAYS EXAMINE THE EVIDENCE FIRST'

BBC, been a senior employee of the BBC and sat on the board of the BBC. He's also run an independent production company (Juniper) and the Runnymede Trust, a respected and influential think tank looking at issues of race. Bizarrely, he has no social media profile at all. I think he's got the skills to do a decent job."

His work to promote diversity in UK broadcasting is second to none. When, in 2022, he was awarded the Outstanding Contribution Award at the RTS Television Journalism Awards, the citation said that Shah "has probably done more for the cause of diversity in

television journalism than any other individual."

Yet the new BBC Chair's views on race are not always predictable. Horrocks notes: "He always had this iconoclastic approach, especially on race. He was asked by John Birt to do something about diversity at the BBC. Of course, he championed diversity, but he was also very good at saying: 'You white guys just don't understand that you're wrong to think of ethnic minorities all as one group. The differences between ethnic minorities in the UK are as big as those between the white population and the non-white population.'"

Much of the press coverage of Shah's appointment, certainly in the tabloids and right-of-centre papers, has focused on his so-called "anti-woke agenda". While there does seem to be some truth in this – because Shah's views are not always what you would expect from a person of colour – the truth is more nuanced. As Chair of the Museum of the Home, he and the rest of the board decided to retain the statue of its founder, Robert Geffrye, despite protests from local activists and politicians who wanted to tear it down because of Geffrye's links to slavery.

Whether Shah is streetwise enough and possesses the political antennae to be a successful Chair only time will tell. Make no mistake, few jobs in British public life offer as much potential to trip up the occupant as does chairing the BBC. Davies, Sharp and Chris Patten were three recent holders of the post who left office under a cloud before their term was up.

"Being BBC Chair is very lonely. I wonder who he's going to turn to when things get tough," says Younge.

Crucial to being a successful BBC Chair is forging a good working relationship with the Director-General. Tim Davie's pre-BBC experience was in the commercial world, in contrast to Shah's roots in TV journalism.

"This is one of the attractions of Samir taking on that role," says Younge. "Samir can't become the editor-in-chief: that's Tim's role. They have complementary skills and complementary ways of doing business. Tim is very much 'Let's get up and at that' whereas Samir is more thoughtful, reflective



Public domain

Pat Younge

'SAMIR IS UNIQUELY QUALIFIED TO CHAIR THE BBC: HE'S GOT THE SKILLS TO DO A DECENT JOB'

and will examine all the issues."

With the BBC's Royal Charter expiring in 2027 and the debate over the future of the licence fee still very much in play, Shah's inbox is full to the brim even before dealing with the controversies that inevitably arise from the corporation's day-to-day journalism and other programmes. His remit also includes appointing the next Director-General. The debate over impartiality in an age of social media will, if anything, become even hotter.

"Samir has a hell of a lot to do and not much time," notes Lord Hall, adding: "What needs to happen is to appeal over the heads of the noise to people out there who believe in the BBC. The BBC needs to be in the driving seat of a debate about what sort of BBC people want. There is more need for the BBC across the board now than ever before. Samir has got to lead that debate. He's got to lay out the case for the BBC that we can all support." ■

JOBS CRISIS: From feast to famine

Good riddance 2023, you were a lousy year for television freelancers. Will 2024 be better? The optimists are pinning their hopes on an upturn now that the Hollywood strikes have been settled. The realists are not so sure.

“The UK creative economy and the freelancers who work in it will continue to be impacted by a double whammy,” says Mark Endemaño, Co-Head of Media and Entertainment EMEA at the consultancy Alix Partners. “First, on the free TV side, there is less commissioning due to the downturn in advertising. Second, the cost of living will continue to cause a high degree of churn for the streaming services – so they, too, will be commissioning less as they try to work out how much content they can have.”

His gloomy forecast is echoed by Bectu, whose survey last autumn suggested that more than 50% of freelancers in unscripted were unemployed. “In unscripted, especially, the squeeze on the licence fee, the lack of advertising revenues and the cost of living are all still there,” says Philippa Childs, Bectu Deputy General Secretary.

This perfect storm was underlined in late January when Channel 4 confirmed plans to cut 240 jobs. Only last summer a report by Oliver & Ohlbaum Associates had talked of the UK as “a global powerhouse in TV production”. The post-Covid boom, initially in full flood, has now become a drought for freelancers such as Alison Martin, Deputy Chair of the RTS Southern Centre and a hugely experienced executive producer with credits including *The Martin Lewis Money Show*.

“I haven’t worked since September,” says Martin, who is now letting her spare room on Airbnb to bring in some cash. “I went to a talent manager networking event and it was just full of unemployed associate producers, researchers and producers, who saw that I was an exec and thought I could give them work.

Many are hoping that 2024 will see an upturn in the fortunes of freelancers seeking work in TV, reports
Simon Bucks



Some freelancers have been forced to turn their backs on precarious TV gigs in favour of work as baristas

“Someone at a production company told me their normal clients are reluctant to commit and keep putting things off and asking for reduced budgets.”

Topical TV, part of Avalon, where Martin worked in 2022, is one of several indies to shut down recently. Its former Managing Director, Chris Riley, says the closure – after 31 years – is a tragedy because the business was still profitable. But “its viability was compromised by a combination of fewer commissions, shrinking tariffs and the challenges of running an indie outside the big production centres”.

One of those, Yorkshire, had mostly weathered the storm last year, according to Lisa Holdsworth, a top screenwriter and showrunner, and the local

RTS centre Chair. “We’ve had a fantastic year for drama, so our crews were really booked up, but we know now that they’re twiddling their thumbs. Not a week goes by when somebody doesn’t say, ‘I’ve packed it in, I’m teaching’ or something.”

Holdsworth highlights the cancellation of major series such as *Gentleman Jack*, but also the continuing drama *Doctors* in Birmingham. “That couldn’t have come at a worse time, especially after losing *Holby* in Bristol. These shows are a training ground for directors, actors and writers.”

Rachel Watson, Chair of RTS East, agrees. Two of the *Doctors* writers live in Norwich, and completed the creative writing course at the University of

East Anglia. “Cancelling *Doctors* has a massive impact in the Midlands but it’s also affecting people around the country who cut their teeth on these sorts of shows.”

Ed Russell, RTS Wales Chair, remains upbeat. Having retrained as a script supervisor he was busy throughout 2023, including on *Casualty* – which is made in Cardiff – and a BBC Three

runner since mid-March 2023,” says Gough. She is now a part-time tour guide at the Imperial War Museum Duxford, but is sticking with her ambition to become a director.

She highlights the challenge facing most TV freelancers: “I could get a job in a shop, but if I’m called up about a director’s assistant role, they will want me to interview and start almost

it was a blip, wait till September, give it six months. We’re now tipping into a year. Who can afford to be out of work for a year, and then be ready at a moment’s notice to jump back in?”

“It’s a massive own goal for the industry. It’s unravelling all the very hard work done to create a more diverse workforce.”

“The situation is the worst it’s been in my 16 years in TV,” confirms Adeel Amini, series producer at Objective Media Group and founder of The TV Mindset, a mental health support group for freelancers.

Amini has set up a series of hubs for freelancers, with Talented People Managing Director Kimberly Godbolt. Two support events in London and more scheduled for Manchester and Glasgow have all been fully booked. “My thing was, I can’t magic up more jobs, what can I do? And people were saying: ‘We don’t feel very connected, we feel very forgotten. No one seems to care about us. You know, we just need some solidarity.’”

Can the industry prevent recurrent boom and bust cycles? Amini blames the unstructured and reactive nature of TV: “Recruitment is so informal. Training is almost non-existent in formalised spaces and, when you suddenly get a rush of jobs, you get people who aren’t trained.”

“The reason there’s so much inward investment in the UK is because of the highly experienced crews,” argues Childs at Bectu. “So, is it morally defensible that, when there’s a crisis, responsibility is handed over to a charity? In France, there is a scheme that provides income support and social protection to freelancers between jobs. We aren’t against a free-market freelance model, because our members like working on different projects, but freelancers need more rights and there needs to be a safety net where something like this happens.”

Back in Yorkshire, Holdsworth remains resolutely optimistic: “We’re very good at talking ourselves into a crisis and I think it’s important to look at the positive. We still have an amazing skills base, both behind the camera and in front of it. We are the envy of other nations.

“But we just have to make sure that we treat people right and we future-proof, so that the next time there’s a crisis – and, let’s face it, there will always be another crisis – we will be more ready for it.” ■



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comedy, *Boarders*. Since then, though, the phone hasn’t rung. “As a freelancer, you’re always worried about what’s going to happen next, I don’t think you ever get used to that. So, I’m slightly concerned because there are no leads whatsoever, though that’s not unusual at this time of year.”

He has funds to last until Easter, unlike many TV workers who have been forced to turn to other jobs to pay the bills. They include Amber Gough, 27, whose promising career has stalled. After studying film and TV production at Anglia Ruskin University, and a spell at the BBC, she secured stints as a runner and director’s assistant on *The Crown*. “Then the strikes started, and I’ve only had two days as a daily

immediately. With normal jobs you have to give notice, so it doesn’t work.”

The challenges facing newcomers such as Gough are particularly worrying to Lynn Barlow, Chair of RTS West of England and an executive producer and Assistant Vice-Chancellor at the University of the West of England. She warns: “It’s going to be incredibly difficult for junior entrants. It’s always tough when there’s a downturn in any business; you’ve got a bigger field to pick from and new talent tends to get pushed out.”

Mel Rodrigues, founder of Gritty Talent, which works to grow diversity and inclusion in TV, fears that many who have taken jobs outside the industry will not return: “We were told



The history woman

Matthew Bell talks to Bettany Hughes, the prolific TV historian who has performing in her blood

In her 2011 RTS Huw Wheldon Memorial Lecture, Bettany Hughes recalled an awful meeting at the BBC that could have ended her TV career before it had begun.

It was the 1990s and Hughes felt “history wasn’t getting a fair crack of the whip”. Her pitch to a senior producer “was going down like a cup of cold sick” before he administered the coup de grâce: “One, no one is interested in history any more; two, no one watches history programmes on television; and three, no one wants to be lectured by a woman.”

Rarely has anyone in television been so wrong. History has proved hugely popular over the past couple of decades, with many academics, such as David Olusoga and, yes, even women, Mary Beard and Lucy Worsley, becoming household TV names. Arguably,

though, no historian has been as prolific as Hughes. Since her breakthrough with *Breaking the Seal: Domesday* for the Open University on the BBC in 2000, the classicist has made more than 50 programmes.

‘I’M LIVING IN THE PAST IN MY HEAD AND IT’S A FANTASTIC PLACE TO BE’

The dismissive words of the BBC producer, she tells *Television*, “gave me the fire in my belly.... I knew he was wrong, but I had to prove it. “Looking back, I can kind of, not understand, but

see why he said what he said because [in the 1990s] there was this sense... that all the answers lay in the future and the past was irrelevant.... But how wrong could he be?” she says, laughing.

We are chatting in a café at Somerset House, while outside snow falls on the ice rink. It’s a freezing January day in London, but it is nothing compared with the temperatures the historian can expect in wintry Georgia, to where she is flying the following day to film her Channel 4 series *Bettany Hughes’ Treasures of the World*.

Episodes on Estonia, Bulgaria and the Caucasus are already in the can for the third series, which airs in April.

“*Treasures* was our lockdown project,” says Hughes. “We [wanted to] remind people that there is a beautiful world out there. I had family members, close friends and colleagues who died during the pandemic, and there was



Bettany Hughes off the coast of Oman for series 2 of Bettany Hughes' Treasures of the World

Channel 4

a moment when we all thought the world was going to end, but what we did, as well as storing loo roll, was share poems, TikTok videos and music. Wasn't that fascinating? It is clearly in our genetic memory that survival is not just about having enough food and water, it is about being nourished in other ways."

Treasures of the World exhibits Hughes' boundless enthusiasm for the classical and medieval worlds. Her passions may seem niche, but Channel 4 trusted the series' wider appeal to give it a Saturday-evening slot.

She says the series is watched by up to 400 million people a year worldwide, adding: "That's a lot of people who want to learn something. There's no agenda, no spin; it's not tricky, it's not trying to agitate or provoke, it's just fascinating, and that's not going to change."

Archaeologists suggest treasures ►



Bettany Hughes in Tallinn, Estonia, for series 3 of Bettany Hughes' Treasures of the World

Channel 4

SandStone Global: 'Extraordinary stories about extraordinary people'

Bettany Hughes launched production company SandStone Global in 2017 with documentary producer Ruth Sessions and art and classical historian Shula Subramaniam.

'We thought that, as a trio of women, we would have more success going into meetings... So far, it's worked. Before SandStone, as an independent historian, if I'd gone in and pitched an hour of prime-time television on the history of Albania, people might have laughed at me,' says Hughes.

'The work that was coming out of the UK was beginning to become very parochial, but the TV audience was [becoming more] global and there were all these international stories that we weren't covering as an industry. We were frustrated because we thought that extraordinary stories about extraordinary people from incredible places were not getting on screen.'

SandStone, which is based at Somerset House in London, has moved beyond traditional TV, producing podcasts and working in the digital world.

Last year, it hooked up with online platform Google Arts & Culture to mark the centenary of the Republic of Turkey, shooting short films on the country's history and civilisation. 'They went out

on YouTube, so they're reaching a new audience. We didn't compromise on the [quality] – they're cinematic in the way they're filmed,' says Hughes.

The indie is more than a vehicle for Hughes, it also makes programmes with other talent. These include *Warrior Women with Lupita Nyong'o*, the *12 Years a Slave* Oscar winner, and *What Camilla Did Next* about the *Love Island* contestant and former humanitarian worker Camilla Thurlow.

UK broadcasters have been hit hard by the advertising downturn and, in the BBC's case, below-inflation licence fee increases. A day before I meet Hughes, *The Guardian* revealed that Channel 4, which commissions SandStone series *Bettany Hughes' Treasures of the World*, is drawing up plans to cut as many as 200 jobs. Is she worried?

'It's the benefit of being a historian that you're very chilled, not about people losing their jobs, but in terms of ups and downs and cycles. I study that over a period of 50,000 years, so things are bad, they get worse but they do get better.

'Obviously, [the TV climate] is slightly challenging but you've just got to ride it. The shape of Channel 4 might change, but the desire for content won't.'

► and allow access to their sites, because, she says, they “know that we let the stories speak for themselves. We don’t need to sensationalise them, because they’re amazing.”

Hughes has a degree in ancient and modern history from Oxford, and has lectured around the world. She is also a highly respected author whose latest book, *The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World*, was well reviewed on publication last month.

“I can’t stop writing – it’s what allows me to be on TV as a historian... I wouldn’t have the credibility without it. I love sitting, late at night at my desk... diving into research, or doing that in the field. I’ll never stop.”

Hughes is a TV natural, as is her brother, Simon, who, after retiring from professional cricket, became a commentator and analyst. Her parents were actors and it is easy to imagine family life was more than a little lively. “There was no shyness,” admits Hughes. “We were not embarrassed by the idea that you can communicate things to other people – it didn’t feel like it was showing off; it felt like that was an important thing to do, not an indulgence.”

“My memory of Dad is of him being out of work for much of my childhood, which means you don’t take anything for granted – that’s a very good pillar to have when you’re working in television. It’s always a pleasure when something comes off.”

Her dad left school at 14, her mum at 16, which Hughes says made her keenly aware that university was not the only source of education: “I knew there had to be other ways to share ideas... and open a door for people.

“I felt that 30 years ago, but even more so now, when, from the rectangle in your pocket, you can get as much untruth and disinformation as the truth... but we want to be joyful as well – people have really difficult lives; my job isn’t to bring more difficulty into their lives.”

The BBC producer is as wrong now as he was all those years ago – TV audiences still hunger for history. “There’s a curious, intelligent, open-minded world out there,” she says, with “a thirst for understanding.

“I’m living in the past in my head and it’s a fantastic place to be – but the past isn’t full of dead people; it’s full of life. If you can access those lessons, stories and experiences, then you’re living in a very rich world.” ■

Bettany Hughes in the recently discovered tomb of Hecatomnus for series 2 of *Treasures*



Channel 4

Hughes on making TV history

Do you tire of travelling?

Never... I love the challenge of being in a completely new or remote place... I’m very happy on the road... I miss my family when I go, but the thrill is never going to wane.

Because I’m doing real field work on the ground, I’ve got the trust of archaeologists and historians who then give us access for the TV programmes. If I was just another television producer knocking on the door, we wouldn’t get the access we do.

Which programme are you most proud of?

The Spartans [in 2002] broke the mould. It was as much about the women of Sparta as it was about the men, and it did pretty well for Channel 4. Many people said [beforehand]: ‘Really? Three parts on the Spartans – who cares?’

And the best show from production company SandStone Global?

It’s a close-run thing between *Warrior Women with Lupita Nyong’o* and *What Camilla Did Next* with Camilla

Thurlow. Both were powerful single films that saw two brilliant women explore the impact of war on history, and their personal connections to potent stories in Benin and Cambodia, respectively.

Your most exciting discovery?

The recently unearthed tomb of Hecatomnus, built by Mausolus, whose own tomb, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

In Turkey, they discovered there was another tomb, built by Mausolus for his father... We got a call to see if we wanted to be the first film crew to see it. That was, in terms of television experiences, really spectacular, to go down into this tomb that hadn’t been disturbed for 2,300 years.

A treasure that didn’t meet your expectations?

I tend not to be disappointed. A tiny bead fragment can still tell a story – I can honestly say I’ve never left a site or location and not learned something.

OUR FRIEND IN THE MIDLANDS

Like a patient receiving life-changing news when they only went in for a routine check-up, last October's BBC announcement that the long-running daytime drama *Doctors* was to be axed was a shock.

For more than two decades, *Doctors* has been part of the TV audience's daytime routine across the nation. The final episode will be shown in December 2024, when the surgery closes its doors for ever. It promises to go out with a bang.

Letherbridge may be a fictional Midlands town, but the BBC Drama Village in Birmingham, where it is filmed, is very real. The people who make the show work as hard as anyone on any TV drama that is produced anywhere.

Episodes are written, filmed, edited and delivered at astonishing speed, all on tight budgets. The Drama Village team also produces global success stories such as *Father Brown* and *Sister Boniface Mysteries*.

Over the years, award winners including Eddie Redmayne, Jodie Comer, Emilia Clarke and this year's RTS Midlands Baird Medal winner, Richard Armitage, have passed through those famous surgery doors.

Doctors has been an engine for growth in the under-resourced Midlands and a way for so much talent on both sides of the camera to find a footing in drama before, hopefully, graduating to bigger things. Where will those opportunities come from once *Doctors* ends?

The reason for its demise is super-inflation in drama production coupled with the monumental investment required to refurbish the site where it is made or to relocate. An



Kullinder Khaila

Kully Khaila mourns the axing of *Doctors* but is optimistic that regional production can recover

average of 1.6 million live viewers is no longer enough to justify the outlay when faced with massively increased costs and the challenges of a licence fee rise below the rate of inflation.

Father Brown and *Sister Boniface Mysteries* have found audiences across the globe and generate revenue for BBC Studios, but *Doctors* is not best placed to emulate their success.

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain has criticised the broadcaster's decision to cancel *Doctors* and has called on the BBC to serve and represent the Midlands better.

The BBC has restated its commitment to the region, with a pledge that its funding will be reinvested in new programming in the Midlands. Details are still being discussed. Dozens if not hundreds of RTS members and freelancers are anxiously waiting and hoping for something to keep them in the region.

The cancellation of *Doctors* may make it seem as if drama in the Midlands is on life support, but school drama *Phoenix Rise* continues to make superb TV in Coventry, and production of the long-running BBC primetime drama *Silent Witness* is to move to the Midlands this spring.

Kudos Knight, the partnership between Kudos and Steven Knight, is based in Digbeth, and Knight's keenly anticipated music drama *This Town* premieres this year – so the genre is not flatlining quite yet.

We will all play a part in the post-*Doctors* recovery and hope to see a Midlands drama scene restored to vigorous health.

ITV, for its part, continues to film across the region: *Three Little Birds*, *Joan* and *Changing Ends* were just some of the shows that were made in the Midlands last year.

Filming in England and Film Birmingham will highlight many other broadcasters and streamers who use the abundant locations and expert crews available here. But to thrive, the Midlands needs a consistent screen ecology in order to build and retain the best talent.

Later this year, the RTS in the Midlands will help give *Doctors* a celebratory send-off. The RTS will remain a part of the many conversations around nurturing talent and the retention of experienced craft people, and will help members to connect with one another to find opportunities when the series ends.

Drama is at its best when conflict sparks a range of emotions and ultimately finds a satisfying resolution. For now, we in the Midlands are left on a cliffhanger, awaiting that elusive next episode. ■

Kully Khaila is Chair of RTS Midlands.



The best way to work with writers

‘Next time I produce a play – no author,” yells Max Bialystock, the producer of *Springtime for Hitler* in Mel Brooks’ *The Producers*. To be fair, the unhinged writer, a former Nazi, does shoot Max.

And did you hear the one about the real-life writer whose producers blocked him from attending the Baftas? He later “liberated” the award from their trophy cabinet.

Then there are the apocryphal tales of 1970s writer-producer duos whose relationships were more Burton and Taylor than Liz and Dick themselves.

So, is the association between writer and producer destined always to be adversarial? Even downright antagonistic?

“It’s no longer a one-to-one relationship” says Susanna Venables Fisher, writer and Chair of the television department of the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain. “Now it’s likely there will be three or four different tiers of producer [meaning that] writers have much less power now than we had a generation ago.”

Does the relationship between writers and producers always have to be adversarial?

Carole Solazzo investigates

Lisa Holdsworth (*Call the Midwife*, *Dance School*), former Chair of the Writers’ Guild, sets this squarely at the door of finance: “The BBC is having to do less with less because of the licence-fee settlement. And there’s been a downturn in TV advertising.”

Which, according to freelance drama producer Phil Dodds (*Emmerdale*, *Hollyoaks*), “means that TV companies are increasingly moving to co-production and co-financing models for drama production”.

The merit of these partnerships is clearly visible on screen. Just look at the production values of the recent *Doctor Who* episodes since the BBC joined forces with Disney.

The downside, from the writer’s

viewpoint, Dodds says, is “the ever-increasing number of producers and execs who demand editorial and creative input” before a script gets anywhere near a green light.

Consequently, says Venables-Fisher: “Writers are increasingly being asked to do more work for little or no money. We conducted a fee census with TV writers, and the early indications are that the majority of members... are not making a living from working in TV.”

Colin McKeown, a producer and the founder of LA Productions in Liverpool, says: “If you’re going to do a co-production, then don’t do it on a passion project. Do it on a project that is commercially viable, but isn’t tugging at your heartstrings. Otherwise, you’ll fall foul of the various compromises you have to make.”

Producer Gill Isles (*Car Share*, *Alma’s Not Normal*) says: “It’s completely different in comedy. There’s a lot less money than in drama, so we have to be really canny with how we shoot, and that has to feed into the writing.”

She explains: “That’s why I get the director involved early on in terms of the practicality of the production,

how they see it and get invested in it.

"I work really closely with the writer and the director as a trio to develop the script, and I check in regularly with the production company. Then, when we move into production, we're all on the same page."

Holdsworth agrees. "Bring the writers in early, get us involved. It will pay dividends. Over and over again, when I've heard about production problems, I've wanted to say: 'If you'd told me about it I could have found a solution in the script.'"

"Some producers absolutely get it," she says. "Nicola Shindler, for example, understands the power of a writer and has had great success because of it." Shindler, the founder of Quay Street Productions, worked with Russell T Davies on *Queer as Folk*, *It's a Sin* and *Nolly*.

But Holdsworth is adamant that, with the proviso that it is "at the right stage of their career", writers "should have more decision-making power". A writer-producer such as Heidi Thomas on *Call the Midwife*, she says, "will create an environment – time, space, a fantastic script editor – where writers can do their best work".

Although Holdsworth does regret that "writers are not encouraged to be on set", she doesn't believe they should "get involved in decisions about things like lighting, or camera angles – there are some very clever people to do that".

So, not showrunning in the US sense, then, where the writer-producer will seemingly have a say in everything from casting to the colour of the set.

"Some shows need more than one writer. So a lead writer working with others to co-write episodes can work positively," argues McKeown.

Jimmy McGovern was a UK-style showrunner-as-lead-writer on *Broken*, and showrunner with an executive-producer credit on *Moving On*.

According to writer Neil Richards, the producer should be a "fan, collaborator, dramaturge and defender". He remembers working with BBC producer Alan Shallcross: "From the first meeting, he'd treat writers with respect."

"He was meticulous in pointing out what wasn't working in a script, but he never micro-managed next drafts and never told a writer how to fix a problem."

Richards continues: "Once execs and broadcasters got involved, Alan was a master strategist at steering a writer through the shark-infested waters. And if ever there was bad news heading the

writer's way, Alan would personally take it upon himself to make the call."

Dodds and McKeown would absolutely agree with that. Both use the analogy of producer as football coach in working with writers.



Although, hopefully, without recourse to Sir Alex's turbo-charged hairdryer.

"Problems can arise when creative endeavours become ego- and insecurity-driven endeavours writ large," Dodds says.

But, he says, being a good producer is about "getting the best from your 'players' by insulating writers from too much 'noise' that might banish confidence. And ensuring they get the nudges and the difficult conversations required to do their best work."

McKeown adds: "It's about putting a team together that not only is the best you can hire, but whose players blend and work together well."

"It's all down to the writers' experience," Dodds says. "If they've come from continuing [drama], then they've naturally absorbed the tools of scheduling and production limitations."

But, he continues: "That is not to say that it should sit in the forefront of their mind. They should always be pushing for the creative ambition of what they want to write. Then, it's the producer's job to come in and say: 'That's great but we can't afford that here, so how about we try something

different?' Or: 'If we're putting money here, then we'll have to compromise on this other element.'"

It is no accident that most of the recent big-name writer-showrunners – Sally Wainwright, Kay Mellor,

McGovern, Russell T Davies – came up through continuing drama. Many excellent producers did, too.

Writer Katharine Way (*Doctors*, *Casualty*) says her advice would always be: "Work on a soap, learn the craft, get paid and broadcast while you do it, build your relationship with the script editor."

"Then that script editor will become a producer. One day, they may even be head of drama somewhere. So if they like your work and you have a relationship, you'll be in a position to develop work together."

This is LA Productions' modus operandi, where McKeown has given many a successful writer their start on anthology show *Moving On*, the nearest thing at LA to continuing drama. The relationships here give rise to trust. "Generate trust and you've got a formula for success," he says.

Relationship? Trust? "The best relationship a writer can have with a producer is like a close friendship. Almost like a marriage," says Way. "The only problem is that, to get there, you have to kiss a lot of frogs."

Producers might say the same. ■

Fremantle UK CEO

Amelia Brown

began working for the company as a runner. **Tara Conlan** discovers the secret of her success



Fremantle

Amelia's got talent

There is an irony to Amelia Brown's rise to the top of the TV tree. The Fremantle UK CEO says: "My mother was hilariously strict with my TV watching and would not let me watch much of it... So, I would rebel and watch it where and when I could... she was a bit of a TV snob."

She and her mum subsequently saw the funny side when Brown found success working on ITV hits *Pop Idol*, *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* and reminded her mother: "You wouldn't even let me watch ITV!"

Today, she heads up one of the largest super-indies in the UK: Fremantle UK has 12 labels and had a UK production turnover of £182.6m in 2022, up 50% on the previous year.

Brown oversees corporate strategy in the UK and is responsible for the output of *Britain's Got Talent* co-producer Thames (which turned over £53.3m in 2022), *Too Hot to Handle* to *QI* producer Talkback (£31.8m) and *Naked* – which almost doubled its revenues in the last financial year to £59.7m and is home to hits such as *Grand Designs*, *Escape to the*

Country and NBC's *Couple to Thruple*.

Brown is also on the Fremantle Global Leadership Board, reporting to the Group CEO, Jennifer Mullin.

Born in London (where she lives with her husband, who works in the music industry, and two young children), but brought up near Newmarket in Suffolk, Brown was not from

'SHE IS VERY SKILLED AT... MAKING TALENT FEEL HEARD RATHER THAN OVERPRODUCED'

a media background – her father is a meat trader – but she enjoyed putting on school plays, as well as being fascinated by TV.

Brown began her career at the company as a runner on *Pop Idol* in about 2003, moving up to production

secretary before working on *The X Factor* and *Got Talent* in the US and UK.

Apart from a brief spell freelancing at Lime Pictures, she has spent her entire career at Fremantle, joining the staff in 2013. Four years later, she became Managing Director at Thames TV.

Brown is renowned for being good with stars. Charlie Irwin, Managing Director of Fremantle label Thames, says: "Amelia's approach to working with talent is to treat them just as you would anyone else.

"She is approachable, honest and takes a no-nonsense approach, as well as being very skilled at collaborating and making talent feel heard rather than overproduced."

When asked how she manages talent, Brown says: "The really important thing I try to tell the team is... no one thinks the same as I or you do."

Katie Rawcliffe, ITV Head of Entertainment Commissioning, says Brown "leads from the front" and is "smart, thoughtful [and] instinctive" plus "very supportive of everyone she works with".

Rawcliffe says people "clearly

respect her as she has grown up within the world of entertainment television and worked on some of the biggest shows in the genre,” plus she brings “great enthusiasm and flair”.

In 2023, Brown announced she was leaving to set up her own company as she wanted a “new challenge,” but stayed after being offered the CEO role in April following Simon Andreae’s surprise departure, “because Fremantle has always been very, very good to me. And this is a really good place to be.”

There have been challenges, notably ex-*BGT* judge David Walliams suing Fremantle over a leaked transcript of him making sexist remarks and a commissioning slowdown due to streamers cutting back and broadcasters tightening budgets.

Brown says working at Fremantle for so long helped her galvanize staff and, while the economic climate is difficult, she says it creates, “scope for rethinking things”.

A key priority is making employees “feel the same way I do about Fremantle.

Jack producer Me+You Productions) has a rich history that helps keep it strong as commissioners seek legacy IP to help cut through – proven recently by the return of Amazon-owned MGM’s *Gladiators* on BBC One. Middle Eastern money eyeing up archive IP also makes the jewels in Fremantle’s catalogue crown more valuable.

Could *The X Factor* be reinvented one day, too? She admits to a “big soft spot” for the show and says the programme still has about 95% brand recognition, with clips often used on TikTok. “So I always think, when you have that, you should never say never,” she says.

With shows ranging from *The Price is Right* to *My Brilliant Friend*, Fremantle has a lot of IP that can be mined for ideas. But, says Brown, the goal is still to create new formats rather than relying on archive.

She acknowledges that the industry has changed and highlights something Fremantle Global Entertainment Director Andrew Llinares said to her. “We need to consider ourselves con-

Brown is renowned for her cohesive can-do candour and solution-solving with a smile. “My approach has always been that, whatever the stress, whatever the issue”, it is a “privilege” and “exciting” to work in TV, she says. “It’s meant to be fun! It takes more energy to be awful than it does to be nice.”

Partnerships are Fremantle’s speciality, notably with Simon Cowell and with 72 Films and EON on quiz show *007: Road to a Million*.

Brown thinks collaborations are key: “It’s finding opportunities in other places and thinking: ‘I might not get all the pieces of that really big pie, but I might get a small piece of many more pies.’”

Phil Harris, Channel 4 entertainment boss and former Creative Director at Thames, is returning to Fremantle to set up his label, BoldPrint Studios, but expansion, Brown says, is done “case by case... For me, it’s about the people.”

Fremantle is reportedly on course to hit €3bn of revenue by 2025. The UK is just one of its 27 territories, but



007: Road to a Million

Amazon Prime Video

It’s a really good place to work... and we [have] a brilliant history... We just need to realign the ducks a little bit.”

This year will be “hard across the board” but “there are people open for business”. She says she is focusing her “effort into 2025 and beyond and making sure that we’ve got the right people, the right ideas and the [right] culture; we’re heading towards our goals and vision; and our strategy is clear”.

Part of Bertelsmann-owned RTL Group, Fremantle (which is on a roll with the much-nominated film *Poor Things* and a first-look deal with *Alice &*

tent producers not TV producers any more,” she explains, because of the new platforms such as short-form and podcasts and partnership options. “It automatically stops us all thinking in an old-school way of going: ‘We make it for this, and we make it like this and we do deals like this.’”

She predicts a rise in “different revenue streams around known brands”; and is interested in “scripted IP and brands playing back into the unscripted world”. *Squid Game: The Challenge* has shown how successful that can be.

Brown says the UK did well last year.

However, she recognises it is currently “really tough” for freelancers: “They are the heartbeat of our industry”, so production companies have a “responsibility” towards them.

As for her own current TV tastes, they include *True Detective*, *The Traitors* and “lots of *Bluey*”, thanks to her children. She is a long-standing fan of *The Apprentice*.

Brown may have started out at apprentice level at Fremantle, but she is relishing sitting at the head of the boardroom table. ■

Two decades on from the launch of its big brother Freeview, can Freely enjoy the same success in a different TV landscape? Freely is a new service from the UK PSBs, due to launch in the second quarter of this year. It will deliver free live and on-demand TV to the growing number of homes that receive their content via the internet to a smart TV.

Freely has already revealed its arc-and-two-dots brand identity, dubbed Freemoji, together with its electronic programme guide interface and information on how channels will be organised.

The service has been developed by Everyone TV, which is owned by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5. Its CEO, Jonathan Thompson, says it exists “to support the health of free TV for everyone in the UK”. In 2002, it launched Freeview, now used by more than 17 million viewers to access free-to-air channels from one portal on their TV screen, using an aerial receiver.

Its sister service, Freesat, connects via a satellite dish and is used by 2 million people. Together, that is about two-thirds of all UK households. Freeview Play, a hybrid service that allows those with a smart TV and a satellite or aerial receiver to get live and on-demand shows, was introduced in 2021.

“As we go into the streaming age, a growing number of homes are buying a smart TV, but are no longer plugging it into an aerial or a satellite feed,” says Thompson. “Freely is a service that offers an aggregated, browsable, familiar, live experience, very much like Freeview has offered historically.”

By 2030, more than half of UK TV homes will be IP (internet protocol) only, with no traditional over-the-air transmission, according to projections based on research by market analysts 3 Reasons. The company predicts that, by 2028, more than 35% of UK viewing will be exclusively via IP, with an additional 55% taking place in hybrid homes that have access to IP.

Everyone TV has been through significant changes in the past few years. It merged with Freesat in 2021 and, a year ago, rebranded from Digital UK to Everyone TV, with the highly experienced Erik Huggers, who had worked at Microsoft, Endemol and the BBC,

Freely enters the fray

Pippa Considine previews the new broadband service from the creators of Freeview and Freesat



Freely CEO Jonathan Thompson

replacing Caroline Thomson as Chair.

“Those changes led us to think more broadly about the future and how we evolve in the streaming TV age,” says Thompson. He describes “a renewed focus from the public service broadcasters on working together”.

In 2021, Everyone TV’s shareholders committed to spend £19m each over three years. BBC Director-General Tim Davie says: “Ensuring that the universality of public service television is sustained into the future is of paramount importance to the UK and all its public service broadcasters.” Davie wants to make sure that “no one is left behind”.

Alex Mahon, CEO at Channel 4, adds: “It has never been more important for trusted PSB content to be readily available to everyone, for free.”

Freeview and Freesat will continue. Initially, Freely will be available only when viewers buy a new smart TV, with the service pre-installed. About 6 million sets are sold in the UK each year. Manufacturers will need to agree to build Freely into new models, as they have done with Freeview. “Our ambition would be for Freely to become a standard that all TV manufacturers adopt,” says Thompson.

The first manufacturer to sign up has been China’s Hisense. Doing deals will not be plain sailing, however. Twenty years on from the launch of Freeview, the game has changed: a new TV screen now represents dynamic, valuable real estate. “Samsung or LG used to sell the TV and then that was it. Ten years later, someone bought another telly,” says Gill Hind, director of TV at Enders Analysis. “Now, they’ve all got skin in the game.” The manufacturers have their own channels, they charge for TV services to appear on the home screen when it’s first turned on and trade in advertising.

They will be weighing pros and cons. There are more voices clamouring for a top spot, but no money will be handed over by Everyone TV – even so, the manufacturers would benefit from any advertising of Freely and, more to the point, people shopping for a new TV may demand the new service.

Others won’t watch on a TV set at all. As Mahon points out: “Streaming TV is increasingly the new normal for audiences, particularly young viewers.” Younger audiences are likely to be watching on a device other than a TV.

There will be a Freely set-top box

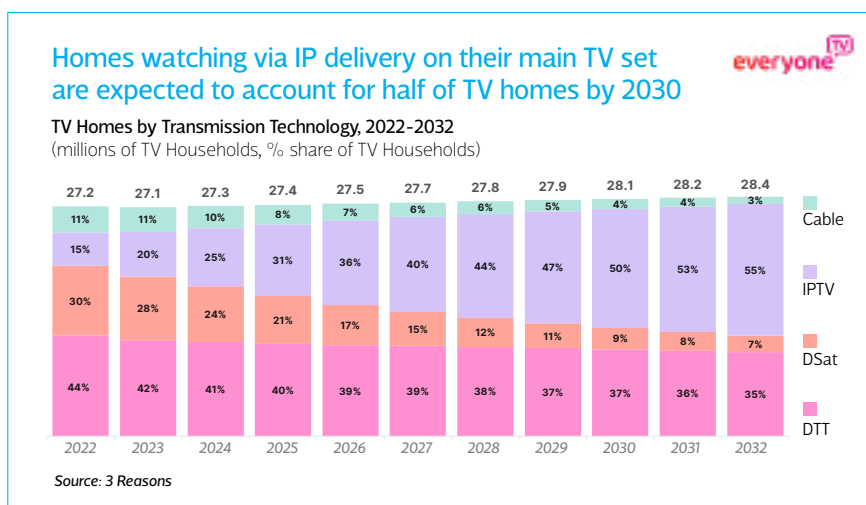
later on, but it is unclear when, and it is even less clear how soon there might be an app. Zuzana Henkova, senior analyst at data and analytics firm Ampere, reflects that an app is vital for an all-inclusive vision: “In terms of tablets, laptops, phones, it should be very easy to download and for people to access and it should be heavily marketed.”

Hind suggests that Freely might divert a younger audience to the PSBs. “Younger people might carry on watching something from one of the other broadcasters, but delivered in

entertainment. There will also be news, children’s, music, shopping, faith and international, adult and radio sections. There is no sport or films.

The top five channels are BBC One, BBC Two, ITV1, Channel 4 and Channel 5. Local and regional TV channels also have priority. Beyond this, and after consulting stakeholders on a so-called “logical channel numbering” policy, Everyone TV has worked out its own popularity-based system.

Other content partners are believed to be coming on board; Freeview channels currently include offerings



a different way.” With the rise of social media and an ever-growing mountain of content, the single portal of free content might help to inspire a younger generation.

The rollout of Freely is consistent with the intent of the Media Bill, currently in draft form, which is aiming to support PSBs’ efforts to reach as many people as possible. Mahon explains the logic: “When the Media Bill’s prominence provisions become law, the technology to make Britain’s favourite TV shows easy to find will already be in place.”

Freely’s launch also chimes with a flat SVoD market in the UK. “There’s a cost-of-living crisis and people are turning more to services that are free or cheaper,” says Henkova, who points to the increasing take-up of ad-supported streaming television offerings, such as those from Disney+ and Netflix.

Advance details of Everyone TV’s EPG show that it is loosely based on Freeview, but there is the capacity for many more channels: the first 700 will be organised by genre, starting with

from Discovery, Sky, UKTV, CBS and Legend. The channel capacity also gives shareholders a chance to launch additional IP-only channels. However, Thompson makes it clear that the big Fast (free, ad-supported TV) channel platforms, including Paramount’s Pluto, are not part of Freely’s plans, saying simply: “We’re keen to coexist alongside them.”

Thompson flags Freely features that will connect the live experience with the on-demand experience, using an on-screen mini guide. “You could be watching a drama on ITV, you might be halfway through it, and you’ll be able to just quickly go back to restart, as a simple, navigational experience. Or you might stumble upon the second episode of a drama from ITV and want to watch the first episode. You can just simply click on the mini guide, and it will show all the episodes of the drama that are available.”

Thompson adds that Freely’s roadmap for further development includes personalisation: “Because we control the underlying software, we can evolve it over time.” ■



From left: Evan Shapiro, Katie Prescott, Ash Atalla (front), Dan Clays, Claire Enders and Patrick Holland

Not all doom and gloom

Last year was a sobering one for television as a post-Covid boom that had seen production and advertising revenues surge fizzled out.

Will 2024 see the industry refill its glasses and toast its own success – or is the bubbly still flat?

To answer this question, the RTS assembled a top-notch panel for its first national event of the year; late last month, it asked panel members for their 2024 TV predictions.

Advertising revenues would bounce back during the year, Claire Enders, the founder of Enders Analysis, told a packed house in central London.

She warned, however, that the geopolitical situation – “a seething mass of uncertainty” – was “causing an enormous withdrawal of resources. Every business I know has been cutting costs from 2023 on and I don’t think that’s going to change, because people are so worried about 2025 and the

A stellar RTS panel presents its predictions for the TV sector in 2024

[potential] impact of Donald Trump’s decision-making on geopolitics.”

As bad as the situation may seem here, it is worse in the US – “a shit-storm”, reckoned Evan Shapiro, the media analyst known for his illuminating maps of the media universe.

In contrast with his homeland, Shapiro said, the UK is cocooned by public service broadcasters operating under far less commercial pressure than “the US capitalist content industrial complex”.

Shapiro predicted that Warner Bros, Paramount, Fox and Disney were all at risk of merging or being “consumed” by a big tech company. “At some point, Apple, Microsoft or Google will buy one of our larger programming groups,” he said.

Dan Clays, Chief Executive at EMEA, Omnicom Media Group, was “cautiously optimistic” about advertising rebounding, pointing to “positive economic signals” and “anticipating 3% to 4% growth during this year.

“A lot happened last year, which is setting up broadcasters for a lot of success going into 2024,” said Clays, citing the launch of ITVX and Channel 4’s rebranded VoD platform. “We expect confidence to pick up during the course of the year.”

He added: “You have to remember that 2023 was a tough year for TV, but it was off the back of 2021 and 2022 being the best years ever experienced in advertising in the TV marketplace.”

Ash Atalla, CEO of comedy specialists Roughcut Television, currently enjoying success with Channel 4 sitcom *Big Boys*, endorsed Clays’ cautious optimism. He said: “We can get carried away with the white noise in our industry – the talking and worrying never stops. It’s partly because our

industry, at its heart, is unstable. I always say to the staff at Roughcut [that] it's the tax we pay for having such a stupid, fun job."

The production chief said that 2024 would see a further increase in "comfort food... old-fashioned stories told in an old-fashioned way. We've already seen the Post Office drama [*Mr Bates vs the Post Office*], a classic David vs Goliath story.

"Look at the massive rebirth of Saturday night television – we're watching fucking *Gladiators* again, followed by Michael McIntyre doing his best imitation of a variety show... [We're] all rushing for the blanket and a hot-water bottle."

Atalla predicted: "We're going to see lower-budget shows, telling compelling stories. That's not a bad thing, because how often do we watch a show and go: 'Hey, they've spent too much money on it... they've actually lost the plot.'"

Patrick Holland, UK Executive Chair of the multinational production company Banijay, echoed Atalla's views about the types of show viewers want to watch: "British stories for British audiences, but not in a Little Englander kind of way".

However, he believed that scale was becoming increasingly important in the industry, pointing to the success of "big reality shows" such as *The Traitors*. "The mid-range factual, in particular, that used to fill terrestrial schedules

– priced between £150,000 and £250,000 [per hour] – has disappeared."

Should television be excited or anxious about artificial intelligence? Both, reckoned the panellists at the RTS event. "It is an extraordinary tool... but

in television "that would be better handled by AI", such as improving the discoverability of programmes.

"The days of the scriptwriter are far from over," said Atalla, who has, in an idle moment, run sitcom and thriller



Mr Bates vs the Post Office

ITV

I really don't think it's going to hit into... the creation of stories," said Enders.

Shapiro added: "It's very unlikely that a great screenplay is going to be written by a piece of AI, because generative AI does not stay awake at night worrying about the relationship with its father. The imperfections that make us human are what make us able to make art."

But, he said, there were smaller tasks

ideas through AI. "From a storytelling and craft point of view, it's a long way off being able to beat what the best of us do." ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS National Event '2024 TV predictions: an expert view on the year ahead', was held in central London on 30 January. It was hosted by Katie Prescott of The Times, and produced by Julie McKeen and David Amodio.

QUESTION & ANSWER

Q Is there room for real originality in such a risk-adverse business as television?

A **Claire Enders:** Our creativity is endless... there will be a constant stream of talent.

A **Patrick Holland:** The excitement that you have when you see an original idea makes you [go]: 'I'm going to make this show'.... We're all in this industry to do something new.

Q Is sustainability becoming a luxury?

A **Ash Atalla:** Broadcasters are not working with us unless we adhere to certain things on set.... We used to get

asked nicely and it was: 'If you can, that would be good.'

Now... broadcasters are saying: 'We won't work with you unless you do X, Y and Z.' It's a strong-arm tactic and it makes absolute sense to me.

Q Last year was a bad year for freelancers in TV. Will this year be any better?

A **Ash Atalla:** I feel for freelancers; we sense it when people come into see us for jobs... I can see people are hurting.... The truth is, I don't think there are more shows going to be made this year; I think [there will] be fewer.

A **Claire Enders:** Movie-making is booming so, if you can get yourself into movies, I'd be making that shift now and staying there.

A **Patrick Holland:** If you're not getting jobs in a particular genre, look at reskilling or [at] different parts of the industry.

A **Evan Shapiro:** If you follow the money, there's a lot going to sport.

Q Is the decline in linear TV flattening out?

A **Claire Enders:** The linear decline is a systemic change in the market – it's going to keep going. But we do have 67 million people here, and those of us over 45 have an awful lot of money and we're living very long lives.... So, we are not at the end of the digital transition.

A **Patrick Holland:** Think about the power of live [TV] in terms of Eurovision, the King's coronation and the scale of those audiences, then you think about sport this summer [Euro football and Olympics] and the election and... *Love Island*... the convening power of television is still such an extraordinary thing.

A **Evan Shapiro:** Linear will survive for people who like to have stuff curated and for sport and news.

A modern twist on a TV staple



Marlow sleuths, from left: Judith Potts (Samantha Bond), Becks Starling (Cara Horgan) and Suzie Harris (Jo Martin)

UKTV

Nefarious goings-on in the genteel Buckinghamshire town of Marlow begin when a much-loved gallery owner is shot dead at his riverside home. So far, so standard for a murder mystery. Things then take an unusual twist when the unlikeliest of trios takes matters into its own hands.

Fronting *The Marlow Murder Club*, the first original commission from UKTV's Drama channel, are retiree Judith Potts (Samantha Bond); Becks Starling (Cara Horgan), who, as a vicar's wife, is defined by her family; and single mum Suzie Harris (Jo Martin, best known for playing an incarnation of the Doctor in *Doctor Who*), who is contending with becoming an empty nester.

The women are united – and motivated – by the fact that each in their own way is overlooked by society,

Three ordinary women are the unlikely sleuths in UKTV Drama's first original commission, *The Marlow Murder Club*. **Shilpa Ganatra** visits the crime scene

which makes them a refreshing and atypical focal point for the series.

Over the course of two two-hour episodes, our crime-solving trio scour the Thameside town of Marlow for clues, much to the chagrin of newly promoted Detective Sergeant Tanika Malik (Natalie Dew), who is struggling to command respect at work, while grappling with her busy home life.

"Each of our characters might as well

be invisible – we just don't exist," says Martin. "To put all of us into the one show, some may say it's a recipe for disaster, but I think it's a recipe for success. The last female crime-solving trio I'm aware of was *Charlie's Angels*, and they had Bosley [a male private detective] telling them what to do. As well as solving crime, we're hearing about these women's lives and desires. It's not often stories like these are to the fore."

The women in the series are inspired by the family of *Death in Paradise* creator Robert Thorogood, who wrote this series and *The Marlow Murder Club* books on which it is based. "My father was reasonably absent when I was growing up and I was basically raised by my mum, her friends, my great-aunts and my grandmothers," he says.

"They were all batty, cigarette smoking women who did crosswords and spent the whole day laughing and gossiping. I always got the impression

that they were far cleverer than their husbands, who wore suits and had the status. Amazing, proud, independent, brilliant women are so good at leading murder mystery shows.”

The show’s opening scene grabs the audience’s attention. In it, Judith peels off her robe and swims naked in the Thames. Alison Carpenter, executive for Monumental, one of *The Marlow*

Meanwhile, *Mrs Sidhu Investigates*, another Monumental production airing on Drama, was commissioned for television following years as a popular BBC Radio 4 series.

With *The Marlow Murder Club*, it is telling that, while it depicts a diverse community, Suzie wasn’t originally a black character; nor is her narrative defined by her colour. Does this indi-

sign of the times. That would never have happened five or 10 years ago.”

It does seem that more producers accept the need for cosy TV crime that isn’t a historical or period piece to accurately reflect the world around us. Certainly, there is no let up in the popularity of the genre. For starters, *Death in Paradise* has just begun its 13th – yes, 13th – series. Elsewhere, *Midsomer Murders* and *Vera* are still going strong after 27 and 13 years, respectively.

“If you’re into light-hearted murder mysteries, you’re into them year after year,” says Thorogood. “The world is really confusing, bad things are going on and sometimes we want drama to reflect that. But sometimes we want drama to give us the opposite of that. And with the stories I write, someone’s always murdered at the beginning, so the stakes are high, there’s a limited number of suspects and the killer is always caught, so you can tie a knot on the story.”

Aligned with its broad, slightly older demographic, *The Marlow Murder Club* is a fitting choice as the first original commission for the Drama channel. Hilary Rosen, UKTV’s Director of Commissioning, says: “The first show didn’t need to be a murder mystery, but we have a strong understanding of our audience. And we know it’s an evergreen. Viewers love the redemptive nature of solving crime – good triumphing over evil and bringing villains to justice.”

To provide the show with the budget it needed, US PBS Masterpiece came on board early in the process. It had previously worked with UKTV as co-producer on the Scottish crime drama *Annika*. Rosen says: “Like all broadcasters, we don’t fully fund dramas and we’re always looking to work with creative partners to ensure that we can bring our shows to screen.”

With luck, *The Marlow Murder Club* will repeat the success of the books (which have been translated into 15 languages) and become an international best-seller – Thorogood’s plan all along. “When you’re writing, you do think, ‘What’s the poster?’” he says. “As well as being an authentic writer who wants to exercise his voice and find truth, I also want this to be a big international hit.” ■

The Marlow Murder Club airs in early March on Drama and will be available to watch on UKTV Play.



DS Tanika Malik (Natalie Dew)

UKTV

Murder Club’s producers, says: “That’s the kind of thing you might not expect to see. Steve Barron, the director, wanted to ensure a modern and sophisticated feel in the way he presented this world.

“I hope that we’ve done that, and created something that feels reminiscent of some of the crime classics, while adding enough of what’s new that feels exciting to watch. All aspects of the production come into play for that: the locations, the production design, the DoP, costumes, make-up.”

In other words, in common with some other recent shows, *The Marlow Murder Club* brings a contemporary twist to the familiar world of cosy TV crime drama. The Christmas BBC adaptation of Agatha Christie’s *Murder Is Easy* cast black actor David Jonsson as the lead, while Ashley Jensen brought a youthful dynamism to Agatha Raisin.

cate to Martin that the acting world is now a more level playing field? “If we think in terms of the disparity in how women are paid and how men are paid, no, it’s not a level playing field,” she answers emphatically.

She adds: “In terms of playing a part not specifically written as a black character, that’s happening to the point where there’s a vibe where some people are thinking: ‘Wait a minute, have I got to be a black lesbian to get a job in this town?’ Which is nonsense. Some people feel they’re being robbed of something, but we just want roles to be shared. That’s it. You can’t be the ones eating all the time, it’s our time to eat, too.”

Martin continues: “Things are improving, and people are striving to do better. We keep learning, we keep trying to educate, and telling all kinds of stories. Even the fact that I did Doctor Who as a middle-aged black woman who wasn’t a size eight is a

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

The Shiers Trust can make a grant of up to £5,000 towards publishing work on any aspect of TV history

Grants will be given to assist in the completion of new or unfinished projects, work or literature specific to the objectives of the Trust.

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

Application procedure

Applications are now invited and should be submitted to the Trustees by **Tuesday 30 April 2024** on the official application form. Applicants must read all the conditions

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

Malpractice won favour with both critics – “intricately plotted and beautifully, leanly written”, said *The Guardian* – and audiences: it was ITV1’s most watched drama launch episode of 2023 when it aired last spring. Ahead of filming starting on series 2, the RTS talked to some of the talent behind the show, including its creator, former NHS doctor Grace Ofori-Attah.

She pitched an idea for a hospital-set thriller about medical malpractice to Simon Heath, CEO of World Productions, whose award-winning dramas include *Line of Duty* and *Save Me*.

“The tradition of medical shows in this country has largely been around a form of relationship drama or soap; that’s the case with *Holby City* and *Casualty*,” said Heath.

Ofori-Attah’s idea was radically different, combining “the authenticity that Grace brings in her writing and her knowledge of how [the medical] world works, alongside a propulsive thriller”, he said.

“I watched things such as *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy* when I was going off to medical school, and the doctors were very heroic,” said Ofori-Attah, who was an addiction psychiatrist in north London before turning to screenwriting. “But from my day-to-day experience you don’t see the pressure that doctors are under... It is a hard job, but you are a human being and you are flawed; you make mistakes [even though] you’re trying your best.”

Helen Behan played Dr Norma Callahan, who leads the Medical Investigation Unit’s examination into the death of an overdose victim and the possible culpability of Dr Lucinda Edwards (Niamh Algar).



Malpractice’s investigators:
Jordan Kouamé and Helen Behan

Made in ‘God’s own country’

With series 2 of *Malpractice* greenlit, Matthew Bell learns how the ITV medical thriller came to the screen

Behan, who received a Bafta nomination for her performance alongside Algar and Stephen Graham in Shane Meadows and Jack Thorne’s Channel 4 drama *The Virtues*, was apposite casting.

“I trained as a nurse, so the language was familiar... I’ve come across what qualifies as malpractice over the years, working in hospitals and GP surgeries,” she said.

The County Meath-born actor also spoke to medical professionals and read health journals. “I went to town on

the research, because it’s not just a dramatic story; things like this actually happen to people in real life,” she said.

“One of the things you hope for from drama is that it will speak to someone on another level, apart from that of [being] entertainment or a thriller.”

Behan plays a tough cookie. “Her hardened edge came from wanting Dr Callahan to advocate for the patient,” she said.

Malpractice was filmed in Leeds. Ofori-Attah said:

“Because I grew up in Yorkshire, the scripts were, from the start, set in Yorkshire.”

Director Philip Barantini, who shot the award-winning film *Boiling Point* and the subsequent BBC One series, took up the story: “We filmed the majority of the show in Shipley... It was incredibly difficult at that time to get into a real hospital because Covid was still floating about.

“We stumbled upon the old tax office in Shipley. It was quite unbelievable what Adam Tomlinson, our production designer, did with that space.”

Heath added: “We have filmed a number of shows in Yorkshire over the years – *The Hunt for Raoul Moat* just before *Malpractice* and, going back, we did three or four years of *No Angels* in Leeds and Menston. “It’s a fantastic place to film – it has great crews, you get a really good spread of locations and the council is very film friendly.”

Call the Midwife writer and RTS Yorkshire Chair, Lisa Holdsworth, who chaired the RTS event, added: “God’s own country is a very welcoming place for TV and film crews.”

The second series of *Malpractice* will see Behan and Jordan Kouamé reprising their roles as medical investigators Callahan and Dr George Adjei. The duo will delve into another suspected case of medical negligence in a five-part series, again written by Ofori-Attah and executive produced by Heath.

No one would be drawn on details, though, with Behan admitting: “I know nothing at the moment – it is all very hush-hush.” ■

‘Malpractice: Online Q&A’ was held online on 17 January. It was produced by Jane Hall. The video can be seen at: <https://bit.ly/RTS-malpractice>.

Last month, the RTS brought together the writer and stars of Amazon Prime's guilty pleasure *Wilderness*, which features a dazzling performance by Jenna Coleman as a woman scorned.

Coleman is Liv, whose cad of a husband, Will (Oliver Jackson-Cohen), has an affair with Cara (Ashley Benson). Liv eschews marriage guidance and decides to bump off Will on an epic road trip across the US, during which Cara and new boyfriend Garth (Eric Balfour) pitch up. All the elements are in place for a rollercoaster of a revenge thriller.

The six-part series, made by London indie Firebird Pictures, was adapted from Beverley Jones's book of the same name by Marnie Dickens, who wrote BBC One's equally enjoyable toyboy drama *Gold Digger*. "I read the book in one go because Bev had written such a propulsive, page-turner," said Dickens.

She was drawn to its central premise: "This young woman, so madly in love that she's given up a lot of herself for her husband, including her career... has been terribly betrayed." This, Dickens added, posed the intriguing question: "How far would you go to get revenge on the person who ripped out your heart?"

The adaptation was tailor-made for a longer TV series, rather than a film. "It's such a juicy story... it would have felt... we'd underserved the characters if we'd done it as a film," said Dickens.

"I come from a very unapologetically soapy background – I want those hooks... you want to leave people on the edge of their seats and rug-pull them the whole time, and I think that's much harder to do in a film."

Coleman added: "For the six hours, we had the same



Wilderness. From left: Jenna Coleman, Eric Balfour, Ashley Benson and Oliver Jackson-Cohen

Amazon Prime Video

Wild and dangerous

National Event Filming Prime Video thriller *Wilderness* took the cast on an epic trip around the US. **Matthew Bell** reports

director and DoP... so it felt like [we were] making a film. We had the scripts, the locations and the budget to [enable us] to explore this psychological tale and we got to delve so much deeper over the space of six hours."

The stunning locations, which include Vancouver, Whistler, Calgary and Banff, in Canada, as well as New York and Arizona, are arguably *Wilderness*'s fifth lead actor. In Canada, Balfour said, shooting had to be suspended when a bear wandered on to the set.

How important was it to bring female strength to the screen? asked the event host, journalist Caroline Frost. "Super important. I wouldn't do a show if it didn't have [female strength] at the heart of it... We deliberately explored female rage, which I think people struggle to see on screen," replied Dickens.

Wilderness is created by a woman (Dickens, who is also an executive producer, as is Firebird's Elizabeth Kilgarriff), and shot by women: director So Yong Kim and director of photography Kat Westergaard.

Benson said she was drawn to the drama because it was "headed by a bunch of powerful women – I'd never [previously] been part of a project that was run by powerful women – and I think that really showed on screen".

Balfour, who started as a child actor, said that, over the course of his more than three decades in TV and film, the industry had become more diverse at the top end: "I don't want to bash men, but there is a different style and approach... women have the ability to be very strong, secure and clear, while also being kind and nurturing.

"There's a sophistication

to women as directors, writers and show runners. That's not to say that there aren't wonderful men [in those roles], but I don't know that it comes as inherently or naturally."

Coleman added: "It's a heightened and stylised piece and we want the audience to... emotionally be with these characters.

"What's so interesting about the piece and what really drew me and is so potent is that it's a cautionary tale; it's a fable and incredibly primal... We [want] the audience really investing in the acid trip, emotional rollercoaster that the tale is." ■

'Wilderness: Behind the scenes of Prime Video's latest thriller' was an RTS National Event held on 24 January. It was produced by Jessica Molyneux. It can be watched at: <https://bit.ly/RTS-wilderness>.

Few TV thrillers have been favourably compared to Tarantino, the Coen brothers and

Wes Anderson but Two Brothers Pictures' ambitious six-part *Boat Story*, starring Daisy Haggard, Tchéky Karyo and Paterson Joseph, is no run-of-the-mill action series.

This multi-layered show, which started its run on BBC One in late November, begins conventionally enough, with Janet (Haggard) out walking on a wintry Yorkshire beach. However, the down-on-her-luck Janet discovers a washed-up boat containing two dead bodies and cocaine worth millions.

Egged on by Samuel (Joseph), a criminal lawyer with a gambling addiction, they steal the drugs. "Janet ordinarily would not do this, but this is such a moment, and her life is in the pits. At core, she is a moral person, but she just grabs on to this lifeboat and makes this crazy decision," Haggard told the RTS.

The role of Janet was written for Haggard, who had previously collaborated with creators and executive producers Harry and Jack Williams on *Back to Life*.

Boat Story's switchback narrative swerves between brutal violence – including torture scenes that some may find hard to watch – tenderness and irony.

Karyo's drug lord, The Tailor, is a masterclass in villainy.

There is even a play within a play, plus silent film-style title cards to help set the scene, and a narrator with an exquisitely syrupy voice. In other words, *Boat Story* is a mashup and nothing is quite what it seems.

Jack Williams explained: "It's a show about stories, why they're important, why we tell them, why we keep watching them. For that, we felt *Boat Story* needed to embrace lots of different tones and genres.

"At times, in episode 4,

Pushing the boat out

National
Event

Steve Clarke hears how the creators of *Boat Story* were determined to make an ambitious, multi-layered thriller



Boat Story. From left: Daisy Haggard, Craig Fairbrass, Tchéky Karyo, Paterson Joseph and Joanna Scanlan

BBC

there's almost a romantic comedy but, at others, it's a dark action movie with an ironic bent. We wanted to lean into the violence so it was quite dialled up, almost comic book and unreal."

Harry added: "For all those things to co-exist, to have that heightened violence and for the humour to be so absurd, you have to create a stylised world. It's always a balancing act. You have too much comedy, and the thing falls over. Or too much violence and it becomes too grim."

Boat Story, for which they helmed the first two episodes, is the Williams's debut as directors. Judging by what the actors told the RTS, the experience was a positive one. The performers praised the brothers' willingness to collaborate and their creativity.

Haggard said: "What's great about the two brothers – and they won't say this about themselves – is that they are very collaborative. When you're working with them, there is no sense of ego."

"There's a sense of wanting to make something better and being open to what that might be. It's always evolving and feels genuinely creative. In lots of jobs I've done, you're told what to do: 'Stand there, say that.' This has a sense of movement, and they won't let it rest until they're entirely happy."

Joanna Scanlan, who plays pasty shop owner Pat Tooh, agreed: "We're in an industry that is very pressured and serious. It is very hierarchical and there are a lot of people putting pressure on the layer beneath.... The two brothers bring a kind of naughtiness

to the process where they just say: 'Let's fuck it up and do that thing to make it different and see what happens.'"

She added: "So few people would be inclined to do that because often it's so serious, with people saying: 'A lot of reputations are resting on this project and there's a lot of money involved.'

"It feels like we're back in the sandbox and able to create a fairy castle.... It's so unusual because TV is such an industrial process. This never felt industrial at all." ■

'In conversation with the cast and creators of *Boat Story*' was an RTS National Event held on 18 December. It was hosted by Empire's James Dyer and produced by Jessica Molyneux. It can be watched at: <https://bit.ly/RTS-boat-story>.

Based on *The Warlord Chronicles* trilogy by Bernard Cornwell, the 10-part ITVX drama *The Winter King* is an intense, action-packed series that transports the viewer back to the depths of Britain's dark ages, where Arthur Pen-dragon has been banished from his kingdom. In December, the cast and crew spoke at an RTS Cymru Wales event about how they approached this Arthurian retelling.

"There is so much pressure when you're doing such a well-known story," said Lachlan MacKinnon, series executive producer. "[Bernard Cornwell was] always like the North Star for the project."

Reiterating the importance of the source material, the supervising art director, Daniel Martin, added: "The books are almost like a love letter to this country."

Otto Bathurst, known for his work on *Peaky Blinders*, directed the first four episodes and had a strong sense of how he wanted to tell the story, as MacKinnon explained: "[His] vision was to make an Arthurian legend where Arthur was the real Arthur – the person [who] would be the man in the field leading the country.... He was very keen to ground it in a way that hadn't been done before."

The series, produced by Bad Wolf in association with One Big Picture, strives for accuracy in its historical setting. "One of the big challenges with a show like this is that it's set in the fifth century and a lot of the Arthurian legends we've seen before have been medieval," said MacKinnon.

But setting the series in the dark ages was a difficult undertaking. "We discovered quickly that there isn't much left from the fifth century," said producer Catrin Lewis Defis.

MacKinnon added: "It's literally a pile of stones – that is all that's left."

The real King Arthur

Cymru Wales Seraphina Allard-Bridge discovers how the fifth century was recreated for ITV's historical epic *The Winter King*



The Winter King: Jordan Alexandra (left) as Guinevere and Emily John as Ceinwyn

Costume designer Sarah Arthur said: "When I started doing some research, I realised that there were no records available for costume until 300 years later than we were shooting."

The art department had a particularly ambitious feat to pull off. Martin recalled: "We went to various locations and tried to work out how we could blend the sort of historical reality... and the gritty texture [in the books], with something we could achieve practically."

Key to achieving this was finding the right locations. The series was shot across Wales and the South West in remote, cinematic landscapes. Martin said: "The joy of the show being [filmed] where it was, is that's exactly

where the books are based as well. Dumnonia is essentially Devon, Somerset and Cornwall."

Defis said of the locations: "Dumnonia is the kingdom of kingdoms, and that's how you felt, when you were standing on top of the Quantocks."

Martin continued: "[The fortress] Caer Cadarn was a studio set for the most part, but... the lead up to it, the gate, was actually something built on location in Morlais Quarry [near Merthyr Tydfil]."

The studio sets were as authentic as possible, with real wooden doors and metal handles.

"It's great as an actor because it's all there; you don't have to imagine anything, which is not [usually]

the case on a modern TV show," said Emily John, who plays Ceinwyn in the series. "You felt really immersed, which makes my job very easy."

Making TV, though, is a demanding job. Addressing those in the audience hoping to break into the industry, Martin said: "You have to want to be there at 6:00am on top of a mountain, when it's hailing and it's snowing, and you have to want to be there at 7:00pm that evening when you're getting a set ready for the next day." ■

The RTS Cymru Wales event, 'The Winter King', was held at USW's Atrium building in Cardiff on 7 December. It was hosted by Lachlan MacKinnon and produced by Edward Russell.

Fittingly for pantomime season, comedian, actor, writer and director Caroline Aherne was something of a fairy godmother.

In *Caroline Aherne: Queen of Comedy*, previewed in Manchester shortly before its Christmas Day transmission on BBC Two, Passion Pictures celebrates and explores her private life, exceptional work and legacy.

The story of Aherne's beginnings on a Manchester council estate, through her first forays on the local stand-up scene, to national stardom is told exclusively by the people whose lives she touched and enriched, personally and professionally.

"We wanted to strike a balance between a story that those who loved *The Royle Family* would come to and the story of the cultural movement of Manchester in the 1990s – an important legacy to her work and an inspiration to the next generation," explained Passion's Creative Managing Director, David Moulton.

One of that inspired next generation is RTS award- and Bafta-winning comedian and writer Sophie Willan, the first recipient of the BBC's Caroline Aherne bursary.

Aherne "created a space where working-class Northern women could be seen as clever and funny at the same time. She changed that narrative," said Willan.

She revealed that her BBC Two sitcom *Alma's Not Normal* owed a huge debt to Aherne: "I explored things about grief and [my grandmother's] death... and I'd always go back to the beacon of light which is [*Royle Family* episode] *The Queen of Sheba* to judge have I gone too far tonally.

"[Aherne] did it first and she did it beautifully. The understanding that the funniest things come from the



Caroline Aherne

BBC

Our Manchester comedy royalty

RTS North West A new film explores the life and work of the multi-talented Caroline Aherne. **Carole Solazzo reports**

darkest of places... [is] that Northern humour. She allows you to know that it's OK... She taps into humanity."

Caroline Aherne: Queen of Comedy uses never-before-seen photographs. "Caroline was shy, so she never gave many interviews as herself," said Moulton.

"So, one of the challenges for the film was to be able to see Caroline as herself. And it was through her family and close friends who provided those photographs that we could tell her story."

Moulton had fallen in love with her work "as a kid growing up in Bolton. But I didn't realise what a genius she

was.... In terms of original writer and showrunner, there was no one else like her." He said he hoped "the next generation from Burnley, Bolton, wherever, see her work and realise they could do it, too".

Award-winning poet Lemn Sissay, who hosted the event, suggested that what was also unique about the film was "the portrayal of the spirit of the arts and artists in Manchester in the 1980s and 1990s", which included Craig Cash and Steve Coogan, as well as Aherne.

"I've not seen that on a documentary before, because music was the big noise," he said. [The film] "shows the true picture of how radical all those artists and comedians were.... It's great when a documentary can shift the focus and show its beauty through a movement and a beautiful human being like Caroline Aherne."

According to RTS North West Chair Cameron Roach, founder of Rope Ladder Fiction, the Aherne documentary was "a call to arms about the state of the industry now. I think the opportunities are few and far between."

Roach told how his indie, alongside others, had been inspired by the film to work with ScreenSkills to create "eight bursaries in the next six months named in Aherne's memory.... It's what the RTS, particularly the RTS bursary scheme, is about, too."

RTS North West and Passion Pictures have announced that this year the RTS North West Best Breakthrough Talent Award will be known as the Caroline Aherne Award. Roach added: "We have to work together to encourage those voices and empower people with that confidence." ■

The event was held on 19 December at the Vue Manchester Printworks and organised by Passion Pictures in association with RTS North West.



Sophie Willan at the RTS event

CJ Fawn

RTS
Technology

Late last year, the RTS Technology Centre pulled together a top-level panel to discuss the skills shortage affecting the film and TV industry at a time when international producers are looking to make the biggest and best productions in the UK. It is estimated that more than 15,000 new jobs will be needed over the next few years to service this rapid growth.

Carrie Wootten chaired an expert panel at Buckinghamshire New University, drawn from education (Buckingham's Dr Russel Stone and Jenny Craig from Bucks College Group), industry (ITV Academy's Sonny Hanley and Jackie Campbell from Warner Bros.) and the BFI (Sara Whybrew). At the event, "Mind the skills gap", the panel agreed that effective and relevant training pathways



From left: Dr Russel Stone, Jenny Craig, Carrie Wootten, Sonny Hanley, Sara Whybrew and Jackie Campbell

Stephen Stewart

Skills shortage can be bridged

were needed to develop talent in all disciplines.

Furthermore, the panel added, it is important to draw talent from all parts of

society. There is a shortage of craft skills, both specific to the film and TV industry and also the more generic trades.

As well as the established

higher and further education (HE/FE) provision, there is also an urgent requirement for short courses, conversion courses or boot camps, the latter giving people the opportunity to develop existing skills that are relevant to the industry. This approach can also enable dual careers to smooth out the dips in film and TV freelance work.

It was noted that the traditional skills of electricians, vision mixers, cameras, sound and production accountants have been joined by new skills such as computer coding and digital graphics to support the increase in virtual production.

The panel concluded that HE, FE, private training suppliers and the industry must come together to provide complementary training if the skills gap is to be bridged.

Tim Marshall



TV shows its power to move viewers

On the economic front, it looks as if 2024 will be a challenging year for the TV sector. But in terms of stand-out shows, it has got off to an impressive start. Several high-impact series have proved television's unique power to command our attention.

ITV's seminal *Mr Bates vs the Post Office* has already joined such gems as *Cathy Come Home* and Jimmy McGovern's retelling of the Hillsborough tragedy as programmes that shine a light on policy failures in our beleaguered nation.

As *The New York Times* put it: "*Mr Bates vs the Post Office* achieved more in one week than investigative journalists

and politicians [did] in more than a decade."

On a lighter note, the new year brought conspicuous success for entertainment juggernauts *The Traitors* and *Gladiators*, as audiences crave escape from these dark times.

Also, let's not forget the success of Sky Sports' darts coverage. Almost 5 million tuned in to watch Luke Littler – at the age of 16 – become runner-up in the PDC World Darts Championship final.

No dumbing down in deep-diving docs

Some fine TV documentaries livened up the January gloom. Two not to miss are the second series of BBC Two's absorbing *Putin vs the West: At War*, the latest film from the peerless Norma Percy, and Channel 4's *Miners' Strike 1984: The Battle for Britain*.

Not for the first time, Percy's compelling account of recent history is notable for

its painstakingly constructed narrative and the remarkable access she and her team achieve. Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Rishi Sunak are among those providing first-hand accounts.

Channel 4's miners' strike series breaks new ground by dedicating each episode to a different community affected by the dispute.

Top-tier turnover at Paramount and Sky

It's only February, but the executive merry-go-round has started up again. At Paramount, Maria Kyriacou, Global President, Broadcast and Studios, International Markets, is exiting after four years. Her departure comes as Paramount shifts its strategy towards US fare rather than international content.

Over at Sky, another experienced high-flyer has announced his departure: Stephen van Rooyen, CEO of

Sky UK and Ireland, is leaving after almost 18 years at the company. He was also CCO for Sky Group.

The Upside wishes both Maria and Stephen well in their professional journeys.

Dame Elan bows out with plaudits

Finally, a fond farewell to the wise and warm Dame Elan Closs Stephens, the BBC's interim Chair, who recently stepped down following the appointment of Samir Shah.

She occupied the job for under a year, but Dame Elan's charm was much in evidence during her brief tenure leading the BBC Board.

At her pre-Christmas farewell drinks party, held at Broadcasting House's elegant Council Chamber, there was lots of love in the room for this exceptional public servant who had served as the Welsh representative on the BBC Board since 2017. ■



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