

Television

July/August 2025



Lovestruck in London

Has Lena Dunham nailed
the zeitgeist again with
her new Netflix romcom?



RTS CRAFT & DESIGN AWARDS 2025

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for entries

With 29 categories in total, the RTS Craft & Design Awards recognise excellence in broadcast television, with the number of entries remaining unlimited to allow both individuals and companies the opportunity to submit their work and to celebrate the breadth of talent and amazing output of the UK television community from Make Up Design and Effects to Sound and Editing.

The juries take into careful consideration production differences, budget and time scale involved and, in line with other RTS awards, the RTS stresses that entrants should show awareness of the need to recognise diversity in the industry and the wider community when submitting their content.

All entries should have been first delivered, in the UK, whether by broadcast or online streaming, between 1 September 2024 and 31 August 2025.

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#RTSAwards



From the CEO



You can't beat a good romcom, so I'm thrilled that this month's cover features the star of Netflix's *Too Much*, Megan Stalter. She is

cast as brokenhearted Manhattan workaholic Jessica, who flees to London following a break-up.

The pedigree of *Too Much* is top notch. The creator is Lena Dunham, best known for *Girls*. Will Sharpe, seen in series two of *The White Lotus*, co-stars as laidback British musician Felix. The producers are Working Title, which redefined the romcom in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*.

Another hot drama for summer is the latest homegrown show from

UKTV. *Bookish* is a charming period thriller whose crime-solver is anti-quarian bookshop owner Gabriel Book. Matthew Bell speaks to its creator and star Mark Gatiss.

The great summer of sport is upon us as Wimbledon reaches its final stages and the Women's Euros and Tour de France get into their stride. But do we tune into TV sport purely to watch the competitors – or to listen to the commentators? Mark Lawson analyses the art of the "sportscaster", and, intriguingly, identifies six types: the Journo, the Poet, the Statto, the Joker, the Ex-Pro and the Bloke.

For some feelgood reading, don't miss our feature on "TV that's so bad, it's good", and this month's Comfort Classic, a celebration of *The Monkees* – for many of us, an indelible part of growing up.

I'm delighted that last month's RTS Student Television Awards, hosted again by the empathetic Guvna B, were a marvellous celebration of TV-ready content. Congratulations to all the winners and nominees.

The future funding of the BBC is one of the most pressing issues in UK broadcasting. Last month, the RTS assembled a panel of industry heavyweights to debate the issues surrounding the licence fee. Do read our report inside.

Finally, this month's TV Diary comes from John Whiston, aka the Pope of Soap and the Duke of Yorkshire. A compelling read.

Theresa

Theresa Wise

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TV diary



you can do about genius apart from put it on air and take the blame.

■ Over to ITV and Yorkshire TV, which remained – both architecturally and emotionally – in the 1970s when I got there. This publication gave me the soubriquet “Duke of Yorkshire”. Thanks for that. Given more recent events, I’ll stick with Pope of Soap. The Director of Programmes’ office came with its own mini-trampoline: my predecessor, Bruce Gyngell, believed you got your best ideas when your brain floated free in your skull at the peak of a bounce. His meetings with the regional news team would see him in the middle of the room, bouncing up and down, deciding where to send the news OB car that day.

■ Then over the Pennines to the Granada building, modelled from the start by the canny Bernsteins on a mid-price hotel. If the new-fangled TV business didn’t work out, they figured they could easily repurpose it. Again, I found myself as literally the last person in that building. I drank the remnants of the Granada wine cellar (tasted like cats’ piss) and roamed the echoing corridors, haunted by the long-gone ghosts of my big bosses – Steve Morrison, Andrea Wonfor, Jules Burns. Rumour had it that, when they closed the building down, I appropriated the massive red illuminated Granada “G”, a noted Manchester landmark, and it’s now in my garden. I didn’t, but I know who did. My lips are sealed.

John Whiston recently retired as Managing Director of Continuing Drama and Head of ITV in the North.

John Whiston, aka the Pope of Soap, looks back at a career replete with comic geniuses and TV mavericks

the roof every night. Before the BBC moved in, Lime Grove used to be the Gainsborough Studios. Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps* was filmed there. The sheep on the “Scottish moors”, not accustomed to smoke machines, coughed so much they had to be taken out into the street to recover.

■ Up to BBC Manchester in Oxford Road, another gang hut where yooof programmes got made. Every Monday, I’d travel back down to “that there London” for the programme review board, so I could end up in a row with Will Wyatt for not stopping someone swearing on the anarchic, live *Sunday Show*. To be fair to me, it was a hard show to police, given the comedy talent involved.

Peter Kay hated Saturday afternoon production meetings so much that, after a while, he’d start sniffing the air until someone asked him what was wrong. And he’d say, “I can smell my mother burning my tea”, and just get up and leave. Not much

‘What is it with me and trams?’ Rita sighed as we landed a

tram on her head in the Kabin for *Coronation Street*’s 50th anniversary, bonbons scattering around her feet.

Retiring after 40 years of working in TV puts you in a mawkishly reflective mood, and I can’t help but ponder: “What is it with me and TV buildings?” Almost all the buildings I have worked in have been turned into hotels, flats or redeveloped, usually with me as the last person to inhabit them, charged with turning out the lights.

■ First up, in the early 80s, Kensington House, the redoubt of BBC Music & Arts. Built on a former railway line, it had the cool kids of Alan Yentob’s *Arena* at one end, the middle-of-the-road *Omnibus* at the centre, and the arrivistes of *Saturday Review* at the other end. Even in the canteen, there was no meeting of lunches, let alone minds. The BBC sold it a couple of months after we left. It’s now a hotel.

■ Then on to Lime Grove, famously the gang hut of BBC Current Affairs, and sufficiently far from BBC HQ for sedition and trouble to foment and fester, which is exactly what you want from that type of department. Then it became the youth club of Michael Jackson’s *The Late Show*, nightly upending notions of high and low art.

After everyone moved out, I was left behind to make an evening of programmes about its history – me and the guy who shot the pigeons on

COMFORT CLASSIC

Four 'insane boys', great songs and a sunny 60s California lifestyle – what's not to love? **Matthew Bell** relives his childhood

Sixty years ago, Davy Jones (the cute one), madcap Micky Dolenz, smart and serious Michael Nesmith and dopey Peter Tork were cast in *The Monkees*, a show about a fictional wannabe pop group living in a Hollywood beach house.

The Monkees was an instant hit in the States and, thanks to the BBC and Channel 4 during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, became an indelible part of many UK childhoods, mine included.

It still packs a Proustian punch, instantly taking me back to my pre-teens. I loved the silliness, sunshine, seductive glamour and music. But there was more that I didn't appreciate, not least the artful, almost avant-garde film-making, a glimpse into the counter-culture of the time – and that the tunes were bona-fide pop classics.

Nay-sayers and snobs argued that the show was a cynical exercise in flogging merchandise, along with records that the band weren't even allowed to play on. John Lennon, though, was having none of it; he loved *The Monkees*, seeing the influence of the Marx Brothers in the anarchic, knockabout humour.

Pop has always been processed and packaged. From Billy Fury to the Spice Girls and One Direction via the Sex Pistols (who covered the Monkees' *I'm Not Your Steppin' Stone*), groups have been manufactured by record labels, hustlers and musical svengalis of greater or lesser malice.

Fortunately for the Monkees, Bob Rafelson was a guru – an aspiring film-maker who went on to become an acclaimed Hollywood director, most notably helming two Jack Nicholson movies, *Five Easy Pieces* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. But Rafelson's idea for a TV series was going nowhere until the Beatles' 1964

Monkee-ing around:
Micky Dolenz, Peter Tork,
Michael Nesmith and Davy Jones



The Monkees

film *A Hard Day's Night* offered a template for a successful freewheeling musical comedy, piquing the interest of TV companies in the US.

Rafelson, by now working with TV producer Bert Schneider, set about building his band. First in was English actor Davy Jones, a veteran of *Coronation Street* and *Z Cars* who had been playing – to acclaim on Broadway – the Artful Dodger in *Oliver!*

The other members – musicians Nesmith and Tork, and Dolenz, a former child actor who promised to learn the drums for the role – were recruited via an advert in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. It ran: “Madness!! Auditions. Folk & Roll Musicians–Singers for acting roles in new TV series. Running parts for 4 insane boys, age 17–21.”

Songwriting duo Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart penned (*Theme from*) *The Monkees* and *Last Train to Clarksville* for a TV pilot and NBC picked it up, making 58 episodes of *The Monkees* over two series in 1966 and 1968.

Series one was a huge hit, but relations were rocky between the producers and Nesmith and Tork, who wanted more musical input. Nesmith was a talented songwriter, yet the fabulous *Different Drum*, which later launched the career of Linda Ronstadt, was rejected for the show.

Series two had more Monkees compositions but the rancour grew as the band tired of the formulaic plotting. The final episode, *The Frodis Caper*, written and directed by Dolenz, was a none-too-subtle dig at the television and music industries.

The Monkees had run its course and NBC cancelled the show. The four Monkees had the last laugh though – they outlasted the show and became a real band, recording their own songs, touring and even making a film.

They starred – as themselves, naturally – in the plotless, psychedelic *Head*, written by Rafelson and Jack Nicholson. Widely reviled at the time, it is now a cult classic.

The last surviving Monkee, Dolenz, recently recalled the film’s 1968 release for *The Guardian*: “They had ‘movieolas’, with one of the five reels of the film in each. and the idea was that you could start watching the movie from any point on any reel. It was a very, very 60s idea.”

Just like *The Monkees*. ■

The Monkees is on Rewind TV

Ear candy

Vine: Six Seconds that Changed the World

Before our thumbs were tethered to our short-form video feed of “choice” – our TikToks, YouTube reels and Instagram stories – there was Vine. A flash in the pan in more ways than one, the video-sharing platform gave its users, via an in-app camera, a six-second window into which they poured a world of creativity.

Launched by Twitter in January 2013, the app had more than 200 million active users by December 2015. But one year later, it was dead.

As a “chronically online” comedian, Benedict Townsend makes an informed and irreverent guide to what happened in a brilliant podcast series for Global. Tracking down and interviewing Vine’s ingenious founders – and some equally ingenious users – he traces its turbulent history across eight compelling parts.

They revolve round an infamous 2015 meeting between Vine’s management and the platform’s 18 top stars, led by a certain Jake and Logan Paul (you’ll know Jake for his fight with Mike Tyson that crashed Netflix last November). By this point, a “cartel” of creators had formed on the app’s views-based “Popular page” who could leverage their millions of followers to keep their videos at the top of the feed, simply by reposting each other’s films. And they soon realised they could leverage this popularity to hold Vine to ransom. If Vine didn’t pay them an eye-watering yearly sum, they would move, along with their followers, to another platform.

It tells of a tilt in the balance of power that this meeting occurred at the stars’ own “content house” at 1600

Vine Street (yes, you read that right).

The problem for the *Vine* podcast is that Townsend and his producers can’t get hold of someone who was in the room. Or can they?

As the story evolves, Townsend regularly checks in with series producer Mary Goodhart. So as not to spoil one of the best moments, I’ll just say that producers – often the unsung heroes of podcast series – earn their moment in the spotlight here.

It becomes clear that the infamous meeting was just one cause of Vine’s gradual and complicated death, involving a confused leadership, unsupportive owners and burgeoning

competition. But the series isn’t just a rigorous autopsy. Townsend also develops a convincing thesis that Vine was “so simple it was revolutionary”.

By making videos easier to record and share on your 3G speed-restricted phone,

and being the first to introduce autoplay and endless looping, Vine played a huge part in shifting social media’s centre of gravity to shortform video.

Pick up your phone (if you aren’t already on it) and tap around: these design features are now so ingrained across all digital platforms that they feel like the natural bedrock of the attention economy. And that’s not to mention the creator economy.

Ask any doomscrolling Millennial what they thought of Vine and you may hear something like, “Oh, I loved it!”. But then show them this podcast. While it has its nostalgic moments – you realise just how many Vines are now embedded in internet parlance – it will probably break their rose-tinted glasses. Vine is at least part of the reason they can’t stop scrolling. ■

Harrison Bennett



WORKING LIVES



'You killed Nicola Walker!': the *Unforgotten* team in series four before Cassie meets her fate

Showrunner

ITV's *Unforgotten* is that rare television beast, a crime drama that wins critical plaudits and big audiences. Now its creator and writer, **Chris Lang**, has a new hit, U&Alibi's riotously funny murder-mystery *I, Jack Wright*.

What does a showrunner do?

Traditionally, it's someone who runs a room of writers, but I write on my own so I can't run myself! For me, it's about having a creative vision that I communicate to everyone else in the production team so that together we can realise that vision. Television is an incredibly collaborative business and works best when everyone is fired up and wants the same thing.

Are you involved all the way to the edit?

From the beginning to the bitter end. That hasn't always been the case; you have to acquire the skills and earn the right – which takes a long time, making a lot of mistakes along the way, learning what does and doesn't work.

Shooting starts soon on *Unforgotten* series seven: how do you keep it fresh?

I wouldn't write it if I didn't have something to say about the state of the nation. Because *Unforgotten* has an inherent and robust structure, that allows me space to hold up a mirror to British society – it's a Trojan horse show. I'll probably hand on the baton after this series. I'll still be involved, but I've written 42 episodes and don't want to repeat myself.

Did you know it would run and run?

It was going to be a closed-ended story. We had a different title – the address of where the body was found, 27 Arlington Crescent – but halfway through production, we changed to something less specific – *Unforgotten*. We knew it had the potential to be a long-running show. With *I, Jack Wright*, I wanted to create a three-series story from the start.

***Unforgotten* survived the loss of Nicola Walker when her character, DCI Cassie Stuart, died in series four, prompting tabloid outrage. Have you been forgiven yet?**

Probably not. The reaction was

extraordinary. I was on holiday with my wife in Portugal last year. Some Americans next to us at breakfast started to chat about how they love our detective shows. My wife's ears pricked up. I put my head down, but she asked if they knew *Unforgotten*. They said they loved it, and she told them I wrote it. The mood suddenly soured. One of the women went full Kathy Bates and said: "You killed Nicola Walker!"

You were an actor first...

I trained at Rada, and my first job was in repertory theatre at Nottingham Playhouse. I met Hugh Grant there and we ended up writing some sketches together. Hugh convinced me that girls would fancy us more as writers than actors – they'd think we were intellectuals. Oddly, he didn't follow his own advice.

Did you enjoy acting?

I knew instinctively that I wasn't cut out to be an actor. I didn't have the talent and I'm too much of a control freak. I wanted to shape my career.

I hated waiting for someone to tell me whether I could work or not. The beauty of being a writer is that it's the only discipline in our industry that you can do on your own and someone doesn't have to employ you.

What were your first writing gigs?

Commercials, sketches for Mel Smith and Griff Rhys Jones, gags for Jonathan Ross. Hugh, Andy Taylor and I wrote our own comedy show, which went to Edinburgh and was then made as a TV pilot, *The Jockeys of Norfolk*, but it didn't land (mainly because it was shit!).

One of your early screenwriter credits was on ITV cop series *The Bill* in 1993...

Each episode was self-contained, so I was basically writing a 24-and-a-half-minute *Play for Today*. I was allowed a year to write my first episode. It was like a training school.

What was your first original TV work?

The Glass with John Thaw and Sarah Lancashire in 2001. It showed me that nothing gets wasted. My brother had started working in financial sales and he used to tell me these stories, so I wrote a spec screenplay called *When Would Be Best For You?* It got me my start on *The Bill*. I wrote that in 1991 and repitched it a decade later as a story about a high-pressure double-glazing company, and it became *The Glass*.

Do you have a typical day?

I start work at 8:30 and don't take a break until 6. I might grab a bowl of soup, but I take it up to my office; I don't stop. It sounds puritan, but I've



'I'm obsessed': Chris Lang

Jon Holloway

been doing that for 35 years and it works for me. I go to bed thinking of structural and character problems... and wake up thinking of them. I find it comforting. A lot of people think that's odd.

Do you write to music?

In total silence. Weirdly, when I used to write comedy, I would listen to Gregorian chants. I have no idea why.

Which writers do you admire?

Peter Straughan – I loved *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light*; that was a beautiful script. One of my favourite writing pairs is Harriet Dyer and Patrick Brammall, who write *Colin from Accounts*. It's both funny and incredibly touching. James Graham, particularly his theatre work; I saw *Punch* the other day, which I loved, and also *Ink* and *Dear England*, of course.

What is your career highlight?

The end of *Unforgotten* series four. Any writer wants to engage with an audience and make them react – 10 million people watched Cassie's death and it became a national conversation.

What show would you love to make?

I've been pitching a romcom for a long time. It's a partly autobiographical story – I was a widower, my now wife was a divorcee, and it's inspired by two people finding love at quite a late stage in life. I don't know if I'll ever get to do it. I'm 64 this year, so who knows?

What advice do you have for would-be writers?

Write every day and begin building up a bank of ideas; they're never wasted. I had the idea for *I, Jack Wright* 10 to 15 years ago. It has morphed over the years, but it had to find its moment.

What makes a writer?

You have to be obsessive. If you succeed, it's not because of encouragement but despite discouragement. If someone tells you, "It's really fucking hard", and that makes you hesitate, it's probably not the job for you. People said that to me at the beginning and I thought: "Yeah, but I'll be the one who does make it. I'll literally be elbowing everyone else out of the way."

That's slightly psychotic, isn't it? But it's the attitude you need. I'm obsessed with stories. I feel lucky to get to do this. It's a long, hard slog, with so much rejection, but I've never stopped being grateful, because lots of people don't get the chance. ■



Daniel Rigby as John Wright in *I, Jack Wright*

UKTV

Chris Lang was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

OUR FRIEND IN THAMES VALLEY

In May, I was driving to collect my eight-year-old daughter from her grandparents' house when I heard a cacophony of sirens as fire engines and police cars hurtled past. In front of me was an enormous plume of thick black smoke.

That evening, two firefighters and one member of the public lost their lives while heroically trying to save a community from disaster at a former RAF base in Bicester, north Oxfordshire. In the days that followed, as the shock, sadness and grief mounted, so did the stories about the remarkable people involved.

Stories are unifying. In the darkest of times, they can offer a glimpse of hope, resilience and human spirit.

I've worked in news media for decades, often calling myself an "accidental journalist" due to a career pathway that took me via breakfast television and shiny-floor shows such as *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* to working for BBC News and ITN. Underpinning my trajectory has been my faith and interest in the compassionate nature of stories, and the individuals, families, communities, societies, regions and nations behind them.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, I found myself reflecting again on how a community can rally round. Flowers were laid, remembrance tributes offered, minutes of silence held; a town united in grief while also finding solace in connection with others, and respect and humility for those who lost their lives.

Reporting news that cuts through in a world where we are bombarded, even overwhelmed, by global affairs, is challenging. Last year's Digital News Report from the Reuters



A tragic fire in Bicester brought home to Kim Rowell the power of community

Institute for the Study of Journalism recorded news avoidance at record levels, with four in 10 people "worn out" from watching the news, finding it "depressing" and "relentless".

There is no remedy to compassion fatigue – indeed, it can be an effective method of self-preservation – but we, as news professionals, are still tasked with accurately reflecting and reporting on current affairs. I therefore found it interesting, when questioned recently during a panel at the Media Production and Technology Show, as to how leaders in the newsroom manage this responsibility.

FOUR IN 10
PEOPLE
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One of the first books on my reading list at Leeds University bore the title: *Power Without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting and New Media in Britain*, a reference to a 1931 quote from Stanley Baldwin and his reaction to a defamatory claim in a popular newspaper. Responsibility draws out emotion, good and bad, but when harnessed correctly it should also be able to bring out a strength of character to identify, empathise with and understand stories at the heart of communities – stories that shape us.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate enough to have people from all walks of life trust me with their stories – everything from sibling separation in care to rape reporting, alternative cancer therapy treatments and modern slavery. The vulnerability these contributors felt able to show often stemmed from hours and hours of relationship-building, taking the time to develop mutual trust.

Encouragingly, trust in the news increased by three percentage points last year, up from 33% to 36%, according to the same Reuters Digital News Report. However, factors such as AI and the polarisation of global politics continue to test this trust.

In my own storytelling endeavours – and in continuing to commit to a career in amplifying the voices of the under-represented, both in my day job and as incoming Chair of the RTS Technology Centre – if the recent tragedy in Bicester has taught me anything, it is just how important human intervention is.

And that collaboration, compassion and communication are powerful tools to have in our arsenals. ■

Kim Rowell is Managing Editor of News Production at ITN and Chair of the RTS Technology Centre.

'The greatest ever': David Coleman
at the 1980 Moscow Olympics



The lip-mic games

While Gary Lineker eventually left BBC Sport over one controversy – whether employees should engage in current affairs commentary on social media – his career dramatised another. To what extent do we watch broadcast sport for the games or for the names employed to cover it? Did paying an ex-footballer £1.35m a year make viewers more likely to watch *Match of the Day*?

Lineker's red-carding for breaking BBC rules on political impartiality may also be part of a broader reform of a genre now almost a century old. Stats matter in sport, so we should note that the first broadcast commentary of an FA Cup Final was on 23 April 1927 (start commissioning those centenary shows now!), broadcast on the BBC London radio station 2LO and via the Daventry transmitter to local stations across the UK.

George F Allison was at the microphone as Cardiff City beat Arsenal 1-0, with Derek McCulloch ("Uncle Mac" from children's radio) shouting out the ball's position in relation to eight numbered squares on a graphic

From George F Allison in 1927 to Alison Mitchell today, presenters and commentators play a vital role in our sporting lives. Mark Lawson gets a few words in...

in the *Radio Times*. Oddly, Allison later became Arsenal manager. Maybe Lineker should offer himself to his beloved, beleaguered Leicester City?

If Allison was the first British commentator as we know it, the pioneering TV sports presenter was Peter Dimmock. On the afternoon of 11 October 1958, he led the BBC's *Grandstand*, billed as "Saturday's

THE QUESTION NOW IS WHETHER LINEKER WILL BE THE LAST OF THE SUPERSTAR HOSTS

new-style, non-stop parade, featuring sports and events as they happen, where they happen".

Those shows began two essential lines of talent in sports broadcasting – match-callers (as Americans dub them), running from Allison to Alison Mitchell on *Test Match Special*, and anchors, going from Dimmock to Lineker. The question now is whether Lineker will be the last of the superstar hosts, much as John Motson was the final BBC celebrity football commentator. Having maintained as high a public visibility as his predecessor, David Coleman, "Motty" handed over to Guy Mowbray, who seems specifically required by the BBC to keep a low profile: heard but rarely seen.

In what feels like similar ego-lowering, *Match of the Day* has been given to a rotating trio – Kelly Cates, Mark Chapman and Gabby Logan – suggesting that no individual will ever again have Lineker's income or impact. Note, though, that non-hierarchical sports broadcasting is problematic because someone has to get the biggest matches: BBC Director-General John Birt made a personal intervention to give the 1994 World Cup Final to Barry Davies ►

King of stats: John Motson commentating in Pasadena at the 1994 World Cup



► rather than Motson, when the men were rivals for the lip-mic.

Across the 98 years since football fans followed Cardiff's victory on eight paper squares, there have essentially been six types of sports broadcaster: the Journo, the Poet, the Statto, the Joker, the Ex-Pro and the Bloke. Coleman – for me, the greatest ever all-rounder in the genre, unusual in being both commentator and presenter – was the epitome of a sports journalist, having started as a reporter on the *Stockport Express*. Because many illustrious successors – Motson, Desmond Lynam, Christopher Martin-Jenkins, Barry Davies, Mark Pougatch and Eleanor Oldroyd – emerged through BBC

Radio, where apprentice duties including delivering sports news bulletins, journalism was, for a long time, a vital qualification in the field.

That helped Lynam deal with the abandonment of the 1997 Grand National following an IRA bomb threat as coolly and scrupulously as Coleman had covered the attack by Palestinian

‘THE BOWLER’S HOLDING, THE BATSMAN’S WILLEY WAS A DELIGHT TO THE THIRD FORM

terrorists on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972. I would not be confident that all the newer sports-casters could do this.

The greatest proponent of poetry in the commentary box was indeed a published poet: John Arlott, a radio and TV cricket commentator for the BBC. As the West Indian batsman Viv Richards smote the English bowlers high and hard above the parched grass in the sweltering summer of 1976, Arlott growled in his Hampshire tenor: “Controlled violence is an oxymoron but that is what this is.” Again, who now might speak such a line?

From 1966, when Brian Johnston joined *Test Match Special*, until 1980 (when Arlott retired), “Johnners” and “Arlotters”, as the latter disliked being called by the former, were a central Joker and Poet double act. Johnston was all nicknames – the Pakistan batsman Miandad dubbed “Mum-and-I” – or jokes, often based on schoolboy smut. The one, in a double act with Jonathan Agnew, about Ian Botham not being able to get his leg over (see box) could plausibly be prescribed on the NHS for depression. Though celebrated as an example of broadcast “corpsing”, it is notable for the desperate professionalism with which Johnston tries to give the score.

When England’s Peter Willey faced up to the West Indies’ Michael Holding,

They think it’s all over – and other gems of the genre

‘What we have here is a clear case of Mann’s inhumanity to Mann’ (attributed to) John Arlott, BBC, 1947, when South African spinner Tufty Mann bowled England batsman George Mann. In fact, the two Manns never played each other in that 1947 Test series and it seems likely that Arlott wrote (rather than spoke) the joke after Tufty dismissed George for 1 and 0 when he played for Middlesex in a warm-up game against the tourists

‘Some people are on the pitch, they think it’s all over... it is now!’ Kenneth Wolstenholme, BBC, 1966, as England went 4-2 up against Germany in the World Cup Final

‘Don’t bother looking for that, let alone chasing it. That’s gone straight into the confectionery stall and out again!’ Richie Benaud, BBC, 1981, after a

massive six over the stand by Ian Botham against Australia during his match-winning 149 not out

‘Lord Nelson, Lord Beaverbrook, Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Anthony Eden, Clement Attlee, Henry Cooper, Lady Diana... Maggie Thatcher, can you hear me? Maggie Thatcher... your boys took a hell of a beating! Your boys took a hell of a beating!’

Bjørge Lillelien, Norway 2 England 1, Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, World Cup Qualifier, 1981

‘Botham tried to do the splits and the inner part of his thigh just removed the bails!’ Brian Johnston

‘He didn’t quite get his leg over!’

Jonathan Agnew

‘Oh, Aggers, do stop it! ... Lawrence, always entertaining, batted for 35

[giggling, almost inaudibly] 35... hit a four... hit a four over the wicket-keeper [collapses into wheezing laughter]’

Test Match Special, England vs West Indies, 1991

‘Shouldn’t you be at work?’ Desmond Lynam, looking straight at viewers before afternoon weekday coverage of England vs Tunisia, 1998 World Cup

‘This is the one – it’s coming back to Jonny Wilkinson, he drop-kicks for World Cup glory! It’s over! He’s done it!’

Ian Robertson, BBC Radio 5 Live, England vs South Africa, World Cup final, 2003

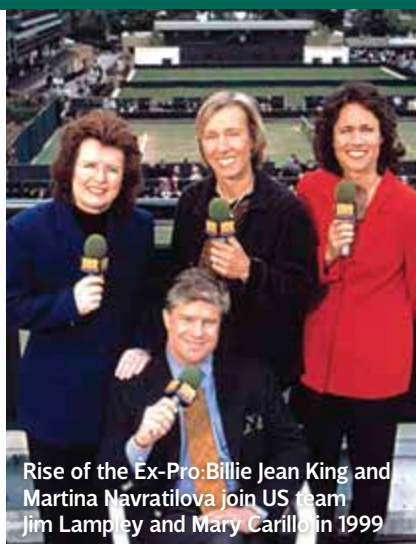
‘Doing about 125mph out into the right-hander – and he’s lost it! Into the tyre wall and he’s broken our camera! That’ll be six grand, please!’ Murray Walker, British Touring Car Championship, 1995

Johnston claimed to have said, “the bowler’s Holding, the batsman’s Willey”, a word picture to delight the third form, although, while researching a forthcoming cricket-related book, I was assured by *Test Match Special* producer Peter Baxter that the pun never happened; a listener had written to Johnston to suggest that it might.

Called the “Bearded Wonder” by Johnston, the *TMS* scorer Bill Frindall, was a classic Statto, able to reveal (long before search engines) how many 5ft 5in left-handed leg-spinners had taken five wickets against Sri Lanka. Andy Zaltzman now ably fills Frindall’s cricket chair, but surely the greatest Statto of all time was Motson, whose football commentaries used copious information to avoid repeated surnames: people could be “the former PE teacher”, “the Hull City loanee”, “the second cousin first removed of the other side’s No 7”, or whatever.

In the earlier decades of televised football and cricket, the Ex-Pro was usually a pundit – Trevor Brooking, Fred Trueman – sitting beside Motson or Arlott. There were exceptions among commentators – Richie Benaud had been a great Australian cricketer and Dan Maskell a leading tennis player – but it was not until Lineker, Sue Barker and Sky Sport’s cricket team of ex-England captains (David Gower, Mike Atherton and Nasser Hussain) that it became the norm for the person fronting the broadcast also to have been a top professional.

Lineker, with his innate matiness and cheesy puns (“Wow Pedro!” when Brighton’s João Pedro scored



Rise of the Ex-Pro: Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova join US team Jim Lampley and Mary Carillo in 1999

spectacularly), was also a pioneer of the Bloke category that is increasingly crowded with the rise at the BBC of Mark “Chappers” Chapman and Steve “Crossie” Crossman.

Some of the best sportscasters cross types. Benaud, an Ex-Pro, was also a Journo (having done a newspaper apprenticeship in his final playing years) but could be a Joker. His response to a blizzard of Viv Richards sixes was: “Just trying to remember where I parked the car!” And also a Poet: when a young batsman was one

DAVID COLEMAN REMAINS THE ONE TO BEAT, FOR BOTH PRESENTERS AND COMMENTATORS

away from his century, he lowered his voice: “Every sporting mother in England will say a silent prayer.”

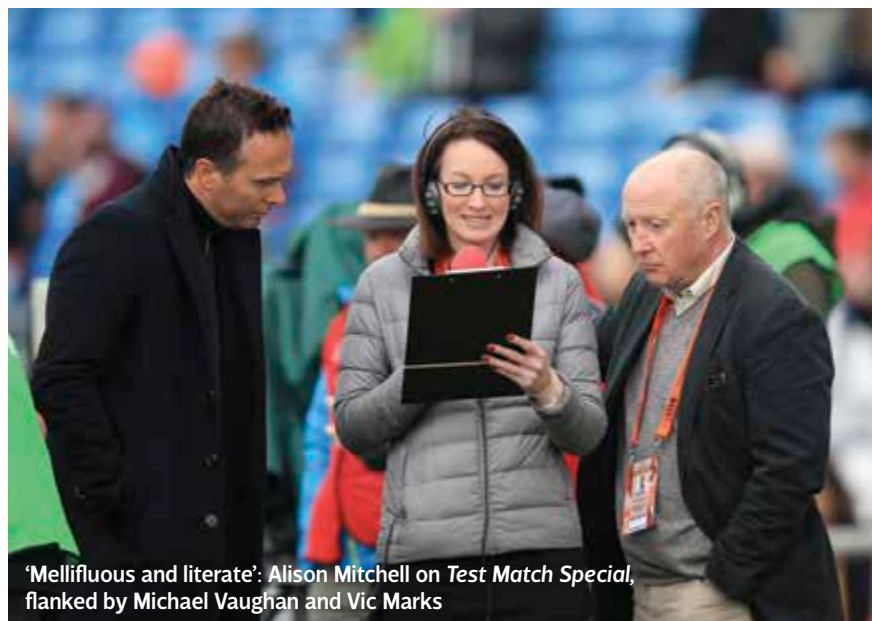
Benaud was also exceptional in another crucial way. Though an Aussie legend, he chose – after becoming lead commentator for all series in England, first for the BBC, then Channel 4 – to broadcast always as a neutral, even in encounters featuring his home country. Thus, perhaps educationally, he avoided another common sin of sports broadcasting: jingoism.

Televised tennis epitomises the shift in the business. Maskell was an Ex-Pro but, on commentary, was a charming upper-class amateur, his catchphrases – “Oh, I say!” and “A peach of a vol-ley!” – immortalising an Edwardian gentleman in accent and vocabulary. He must have seen many spectacular shots during rallies but, as the TV convention was to remain silent until the point was won, his benisons were limited to winners; only when action replays became standard could a mid-point cross-shot or lob be singled out.

John McEnroe – whose on-court tantrums had appalled Maskell – epitomises modern sporting TV’s use of the Ex-Pro as a resource of experience and expertise. He and Martina Navratilova have watched the players practising, sometimes coached them, and, helped by slow-mo scrutiny, provide insight into how the position of feet or hands allows certain shots.

The current generation of sportscasters illustrate two trends: the greater prominence of women and the fact that there are fewer events available to the BBC. Hence Alison Mitchell on *Test Match Special* continues Martin-Jenkins’ skills of mellifluous and literate reportage, but also works for Channel 5, ESPN and Australian channels, while former cricketer Alex Hartley, an Ex-Pro pundit on *TMS*, gives a feminist spin to the Bloke. Two of Lineker’s three BBC replacements are women, Logan and Cates, but they will remain available to TNT and Sky.

This is the future but, as in sport, achievement is defined by the past. Because a prolific live commentator will inevitably sometimes say the wrong thing – such as Ron Pickering’s “there goes Juantorena, opening his legs and showing his class!” – there was a long-running *Private Eye* column called “Colemanballs” (still continuing as “Commentatorballs”). And David Coleman remains the one to beat for both presenters and commentators. ■



‘Mellifluous and literate’: Alison Mitchell on *Test Match Special*, flanked by Michael Vaughan and Vic Marks

All photographs: Alamy

Pilgrimage: Megan Stalter as Jess, posing in front of the famous blue door from *Notting Hill*

Lena actually

The creator of *Girls* has subverted the romcom. **Shilpa Ganatra** talks to Lena Dunham and the stars of her 10-part Netflix series, *Too Much*

Richard Curtis should be proud. Decades after his celebrated English romcoms *Notting Hill*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Love Actually*, the genre lives on, and with *Too Much* it gains a subversive Lena Dunham twist.

Dunham is famed as the showrunner behind *Girls*, the 2010s HBO dramedy that offered a younger and more realistic depiction of New York life for women than the version we'd last seen in *Sex and the City*.

You could almost hear women around the world exhale. Its imperfect and nuanced characters helped create a new zeitgeist, and paved the way for the next tranche of female-led stories, including *Fleabag* and *I May Destroy You*.

Too Much is the initial fruit of Dunham's first-look deal with Netflix. It follows Jess (Megan Stalter, best known as Kayla in *Hacks*), who moves

to London to heal her wounds after a traumatic relationship split. But there's no easy fix. As Jess says, "I want to stop the chaos, but whenever I trust my own instincts, chaos always follows."

Things improve when she meets Felix (Will Sharpe of *White Lotus* fame) and romance beckons... if only she can overcome her crisis of confidence and leave behind the ghosts of her past.

Too Much – produced by Working Title, the label responsible for Curtis's biggest blockbusters – speaks to an older and marginally wiser generation than *Girls*. "I wanted to bring in the idea of characters who have baggage that prevents them from connecting," Dunham tells *Television*. "I was trying to do something that spoke to the

[romcom tradition], but messed up the characters – made them a little shaggier and more complicated."

As with *Girls*, the series is semi-autobiographical: Dunham moved to London (initially to direct the first episode of *Industry*) and met musician and now-husband Luis Felber in 2021. They began working on the series together just four weeks after starting to date. As well as writing an episode, Felber helped shape the plot, flesh out the character of Felix and realise the London backdrop.

Dunham says: "My job takes up such a huge swathe of my life that bringing him in means we get to be in each other's lives more, especially as a newly married couple. There's also the benefit of working with someone you know has your best interests at heart, and who you feel comfortable pushing back against. You already know how to fight."

Dunham is both behind and in front of the camera in *Too Much*, playing Jess's older sister, Nora – leaving Stalter and Sharpe to play versions of Dunham and Felber. But Stalter says: "I didn't feel any expectation that we were playing them. They made it super-clear it was a work of fiction. But it was helpful to be inspired by Lena and Luis as a couple – the spirit of their love is in this."



Not so cool: Will Sharpe as Felix

For Stalter, who is also a comedian, Jess was a welcome progression after playing fan favourite Kayla Schaeffer in *Hacks*. She says: “I don’t want people to watch it and think about a different character I’ve played. But I put a lot of myself in Kayla and Jess, and they have things in common: a natural, happy demeanour, and they both dress ‘fun!’”

The character of Felix appealed to Sharpe because “he was specifically drawn and had layers to unpack”. Sharpe adds: “He’s ostensibly a bit cool when you first meet him, but then you sense that it’s just a front.

“His defences are high and there is a vulnerability there. I like that you learn more about his history as the series progresses.”

Thanks largely to Dunham’s reputation, the supporting cast boasts talent that other shows would call leads: British acting royalty Stephen Fry, Jennifer Saunders and Richard E Grant appear alongside Jessica Alba, Naomi Watts, Andrew Scott, Rita Ora – and



Pulling power: Naomi Watts is one of many high-profile guest stars

from the music cues to colour correction and the palette of the show – to make it feel cohesive.”

She was aware that the bolder elements – such as Jess’s fantasy friendship with Wendy Jones via social media – could come over as “absolutely bonkers”. But “the best things are usually a big swing, and I’d rather take a big swing and have it miss for

the moment. Lena is in absolute command of its tone.”

Shooting began in February 2024 and took around five months. Its London locations – from the hip hangouts of east London to upscale Notting Hill – are a big part of *Too Much*. They added a fish-out-of-water element to Jess’s story and reflected her hopes and dreams. Sharpe says: “It was important to Lena to represent London in the romanticised lens that Jess arrives with, then to undercut that with the reality – which is not a bad thing, it’s just more complicated.”

As a showrunner, Dunham fostered a “safe environment” on set where she went out of her way to hear about any problems the cast and crew faced. “A huge part of being a showrunner is understanding what the people you work with want and need, and giving it to them. It could be that nobody likes the lunch. Or it could be as intense as making sure that any conflicts are resolved in a healthy way,” she says.

“Some people thrive in conflict and intensity. I shut down. On a certain level, it was very selfish: I don’t want to work when other people are uncomfortable or frustrated. Whether it’s intimacy coordinators or diversity training, I feel lucky that there’s so much more language around this than when I started in 2010, because it’s what I was always trying to do on *Girls* too. I love these tangible shifts.”

The result was a set where “we felt comfortable enough to take risks”, says Sharpe. That is evident onscreen, with Dunham’s “big swings” delivering in her singular style.

In 2025, the romcom is already in rude health. With the advent of *Too Much*, it gets even ruder. ■

Too Much is on Netflix from 10 July.



‘In command’: Lena Dunham on set in showrunner mode

Emily Ratajkowski as Wendy Jones, the new girlfriend of Jess’s ex.

Too Much revels in witty episode names that are a reality-checked version of classic love stories (*Nonsense and Sensibility*, *Pity Woman*, *Enough Actually*). Unlike some of the romcoms it references, though, “it’s 10 episodes rather than a 90-minute film, so there’s a lot of backstory and fleshing out you can do”, says Dunham.

Echoing contemporary life, the series tackles such issues as navigating neuroses and the constant presence of the past in social media posts. Unhurried scenes are given over to character dynamics. Dunham says: “It involved a lot of refining in the edit – everything

some people, than take no swings”. For Sharpe, navigating the tonal shifts was about playing it straight. He explains: “It’s enjoyable to have fun with the format, but as an actor, the character doesn’t know they’re in a romantic comedy or in a funny scene. When we were filming it, I was just concentrating on what was stressing out Felix in

‘LENA AND LUIS INSPIRED US. IT’S FICTION BUT THE SPIRIT OF THEIR LOVE IS THERE’

All photographs: Netflix

Simon Heath says I'm catching him on a half-battery kind of day. He had his wisdom teeth out last week and that's still giving him gyp, but Heath on half a battery remains an energetic presence, a tireless provider of facts, figures and ideas.

Memorabilia fills his London office, including posters, a Bafta and other awards. They are testament to the hit rate of one of Britain's most prolific and consistent producers, World Productions, which this year turned 35. *The Bombing of Pan Am 103*, *Save Me*, *The Pembrokeshire Murders*, *Until I Kill You* and *Karen Pirie* are recent titles on World's slate. Its first series was 1992 police drama *Between the Lines*, and early successes included *Ballykissangel* and *This Life*. Not forgetting the ratings juggernaut that was (and possibly still is) *Line of Duty*.

Best get that last one out of the way: is it coming back? Heath grins. In his 16th year as the company's CEO, having been recruited by World founder Tony Garnett in 1997, he is used to dealing charmingly but obliquely with such enquiries. "It's something we're talking about."

Would he like to see it return? "Yes, it's a good show, and the passage of time leaves us with stuff to say; a lot has happened since those [series six] scripts were written in 2019."

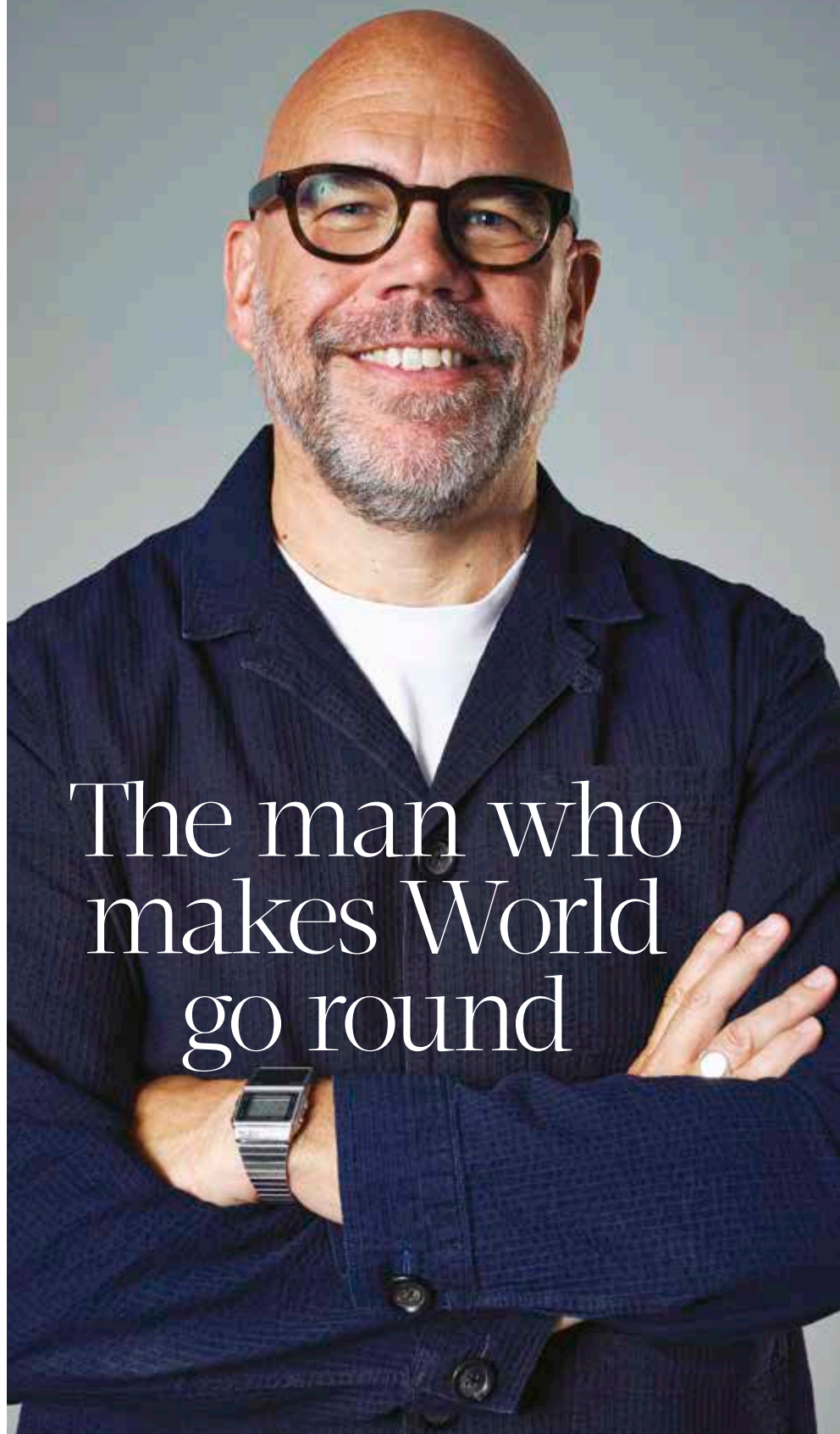
After its first three series, *Line of Duty* was upgraded from BBC Two to BBC One primetime; by the series six finale, 13 million viewers tuned in. What did Heath learn from that triumph? "Never underestimate the audience," he replies. "It's a complex show, with lots of elements, mystery and back-story, some of it quite dark. Jed [Mercurio, the writer] is constantly challenging the audience to keep up. That's probably why the BBC put it on BBC Two initially, before it grew too big not to put on One."

"When we changed channels, everyone was saying, 'You're going to have to make the show simpler, change the casting, but I don't think we changed it at all. It was a stroke of good fortune that we'd already approached Thandie Newton for the fourth season. The lead is always someone available or who's watched the show and wanted in.'"

Only to get bumped off within the first 10 minutes, in some cases? "Yes, we do that," he says with another grin.

Heath's elevated place, deciding the

From *Line of Duty* to *Vigil*, Simon Heath has steered the ship at World Productions.
Caroline Frost meets a man on a mission



The man who
makes World
go round

fate of some of TV's biggest characters, is a long way from his roots in Birmingham. This, he says, was "working class, with one O-level in the family".

Heath was originally set on a career in journalism but was also an avid TV viewer, particularly of shows like *Brookside*, *Cracker* and *Our Friends in the North*. He answered a job advert to be a trainee script editor for Zenith North in Newcastle and soon found himself learning the ropes on *Byker Grove*.

He subsequently came to London with Ant & Dec ("they were PJ & Duncan then"), helping them make the jump to adult TV, before taking a fortuitous leap himself to World Productions, courtesy of Tony Garnett.

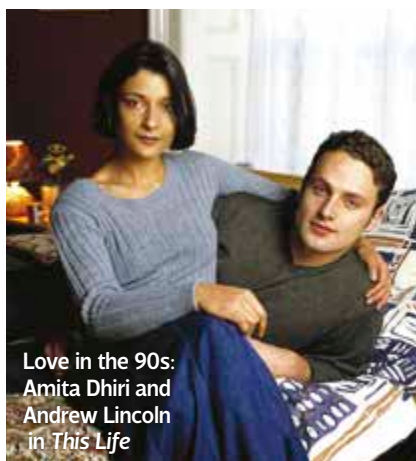
Heath met the veteran producer at his house in Bayswater, where the pair bonded over their Midlands roots. He gives credit to Garnett for guiding the formative decade of his career: "So many lessons. We often say here, 'What would Tony do?'. He was good at

'TRYING TO KEEP AUDIENCE LOYALTY SEASON AFTER SEASON IS REALLY HARD'

demystifying everything. He hated pretentiousness and would always cut through it. And he hated awards. He felt you shouldn't put creative people in competition with each other. He didn't believe in auteurs, he was very much, 'Drama is made by teams.'"

Heath's World team includes 22 staff based in London, Wales and Scotland. He says the best part of his job is "when someone picks up the phone and says they want to make your drama". He pauses. "It's never quite a champagne moment these days for all the reasons around funding, but it's still a result. The challenge is that you can never sit back and relax – nobody gives you a five-season order."

Heath has had a ringside seat at TV drama's evolution from the 1990s, when only four main channels meant "you were pitching to three people in this country". Now, in the age of streaming and binge-watching, there are more prospects, but also "everyone wanting the next new thing. Trying to keep the loyalty of an audience season after season is really hard."



Love in the 90s: Amita Dhiri and Andrew Lincoln in *This Life*

BBC

He says he is "a commissioning agnostic" when it comes to landing his shows: "Wherever you go, there are different challenges. As someone who's sat here for 27 years, the fact there are so many more places making drama these days is a positive."

Does he worry about the fate of public service broadcasters in the face of deep-pocketed streamers? "I don't worry about the content, because I think that's strong," he starts. "The kind of shows they make and the way they speak to a British audience is almost irreplaceable. I worry about the funding model of advertising and the licence fee – does that work, going into the future?"

What hasn't changed is Heath's eye for a good project. Asked for the special sauce, he describes "looking for that new idea or premise that immediately excites you, an element that feels unique". He cites the recent police

thriller *Code of Silence*, starring deaf actor Rose Ayling-Ellis as a lip-reader. "It's a genre we know well, but you take that new perspective." And *Vigil*: "A murder investigation on a submarine. It's a heightened reality that the audience is prepared to engage in."

What's more important, writing or talent? "If the writing is good, the talent will come." And what makes a good actor? "There's a truthfulness of performance that I look for." He quotes his mentor. "Tony had a saying: 'The thing about acting, Simon... we know it goes on but we don't want to see it!'"

As for the future of World, Heath is less interested in expansion than sustainability. He wants to continue "picking the shows we feel passionate about and we feel can get made". He talks about pushing further into the regions and, specifically, opening a Birmingham office if it could be made viable, both with the right project and the possibility of backing somebody to develop their own local slate.

He has the right subject ready to go: "I hope to get made a story about the campaign for justice for those who lost loved ones in the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974. Everyone knows about the Birmingham Six, but the families of the 21 victims still don't know who planted the bombs. They don't get the publicity they deserve. But there's a script and we're going to try."

Heath wants to bring his creative journey full circle to the place where it all began: "I just want to support the city. I don't think it has had a fair crack of the whip." ■



Underwater thrills: Paterson Joseph and Suranne Jones in *Vigil*

BBC

Mark Gatiss
as Gabriel Book in
post-war London



Bookmark this!

Mark Gatiss has delighted in detective fiction since childhood, going on to co-create *Sherlock*

with Steven Moffat and pen episodes of the David Suchet *Poirot*. Now he has his own crime-solver to explore: antiquarian bookshop owner Gabriel Book.

In a clear case of nominative determinism, Book's bookshop is called "Book's", and from there he solves crimes largely through an encyclopaedic knowledge harvested from... books.

Bookish is an absolute pleasure – erudite (as you'd expect from Gatiss) and, by turns, light and dark. It boasts a fabulous cast of regulars: Polly Walker, Elliot Levey and relative newcomers Connor Finch and Buket Kömür. Guests across the six-part series on UKTV crime channel U&Alibi include Daniel Mays, Rosie Cavaliero, Joely Richardson and Paul McGann.

The drama is set in post-Second World War London, a favourite era for Gatiss. "Everyone's obsessed with the war, but the post-war period is never given much attention; yet it saw the foundation of the welfare state by the most radical government we've ever

had," Gatiss tells *Television*. "It was an extraordinary time of optimism and disaster. People came back from the war wanting a New Jerusalem; that's why Churchill was booted out.

"But it soured quickly because rationing was worse – and then there was the great freeze of 1947, which fucked Labour."

Gatiss says there is a "maelstrom of stuff" to dip into, including "liberated women who've been told to get back behind the kitchen sink" and "soldiers who've been trained to kill, not knowing what to do with themselves".

**'NOT SO LONG
AGO, A GAY MAN
LIKE BOOK
WOULD HAVE
HAD TO HIDE
WHO HE WAS'**

Bookish is the result of Gatiss's chance encounter with Walter Iuzzolino and Jo McGrath from series producers Eagle Eye Drama. McGrath, the indie's Chief Creative Officer, recalls: "We were at the *Radio Times* Covers Party, and – as I'm shameless – I'll go up to anyone and talk. We got chatting to Mark and I asked if there was anything he'd like to do."

Gatiss had already written a draft of the first episode, which Iuzzolino – Eagle Eye CEO and the Walter of Channel 4 foreign drama service *Walter Presents* fame – read at a gallop: "I remember calling Jo straight after and saying: 'Am I mad or is this the best script we've ever read?'"

"We really responded to its tone. It was serious and emotionally compelling but also pleasurable."

Soon after joining UKTV as Head of Drama in January 2024, Helen Perry began talking to her favourite producers as she sought to expand the broadcaster's slate of original series. One of

her first ports of call was Eagle Eye, having worked with the indie on *Professor T* in her previous job at ITV.

Bookish ticked Perry's boxes: a period crime drama with substance, which she describes as a Trojan horse show: "It's sheer entertainment but it also has something to say."

Gabriel Book, a gay man living at a time when homosexuality was illegal, is married to his childhood friend, Trottie (Walker). The "lavender marriage" at the heart of the show struck Perry as a new storyline for TV. "It's not that long ago that a man like Book would have had to hide who he was," she says. "*Bookish* serves as a reminder that we have to cherish what we've got now and not take it for granted."

Though set in London's "Booksellers' Row" (Cecil Court, behind Charing Cross Road), *Bookish* was largely filmed in Belgium under its tax shelter. And it looks beautiful, faithfully recreating 1946 London. Filming abroad and harnessing talent worldwide is Eagle Eye's *modus operandi*, gained from Iuzzolino and McGrath's experience with *Walter Presents*. "We have first-hand knowledge of producers across Europe and the world who make beautiful things from more constrained budgets than in the UK," explains Iuzzolino.

"They don't have the Anglo-American scale that allows them to make a drama for £3m an hour, so they



Guest stars Joely Richardson and Jacob Fortune-Lloyd

have to make it with £1m or £750,000. Over the years, we got to talk to wonderful creatives who could bring quality to screen for less. It's [about] talent and tax breaks – we produce drama the way the film community has been producing great cinema over the past 20 years."

McGrath adds: "You get tremendous bang for your buck with our shows; they look good and stream really well. We are making shows that need to do well in the international market, not just the UK."

In an entirely justified show of faith, *Bookish* has been recommissioned for a second series (filming starts this

summer) even before the first airs. "We have a 100% track record in terms of recommissions," says McGrath.

"It felt like Mark was just getting started with series one," says Perry. "He's one of those writers who, when you look him in the eye, you can see the cogs whirring. We want to back his passion and allow it to grow."

Last word to Gatiss: "*Bookish* is not cosy crime. It has hopefully got something to say about a very interesting period and about how people emerged from the war into a new world." ■

***Bookish* is available on U&Alibi (on Sky, Virgin and NOW) from 16 July**

Mark, my words: Gatiss on *Bookish*

'Gabriel Book is an optimistic man who has seen some very bad things. He appears – and this is drawn from Dorothy L Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey – frivolous, but he isn't. He uses that as a front to disarm people. He has night terrors from shell shock in the First World War.'

Gatiss wrote the first two episodes solo and the latter four with Matthew Sweet. 'He's a gifted writer,' says Gatiss of Sweet. 'I knew how brilliant he is at fiction, though he's mostly known as a historian. He wrote a fine book on British cinema called *Shepperton Babylon*.'

'*Bookish* is great fun [to write] but it's still hard. The easy bit, as it were, is the characters, the world they inhabit and the language. I'm at ease with that world. The fiendish thing is the murder mysteries; they are just very difficult. That's the reason why Agatha Christie is

still the queen – because her plots are so remarkable and so simple. The really difficult thing is trying to get a balance between not being parsimonious with clues but not being too obvious, and trying to find twists. Once you start writing, [the story] starts to mutate. It sounds like such a cliché, but it genuinely takes on a life of its own.

'I'm trying to get better at murder mysteries by stress-testing the logic of

[plots] before I start writing, [otherwise] you can get lost in the fun of a nice scene and then it doesn't actually make any sense.'

And who are his own favourite fictional detectives? 'Obviously, Sherlock Holmes. On balance, I prefer Miss Marple to Poirot. I've written three *Poirots* for David Suchet, but Miss Marple is so clever – she sees the world in microcosm. She has never really left St Mary Mead, so when she encounters a problem, she'll suddenly say: "Oh, this is like Mrs Phillips at the post office and her naughty son, Gerald."

'It's such a clever idea. Agatha Christie is world-beating.

'Of the lesser-known ones, I'm fond of Albert Campion, created by Margery Allingham, and Max Carrados, the blind detective. I collect Golden Age murder mysteries with very odd titles, of which there's no end. My favourite – because it makes me cry with laughter – is from the 1930s: *They Rang Up the Police*.'



'So clever': Joan Hickson as Miss Marple



The BBC dilemma

As charter renewal looms, our expert panel asks if the licence fee can survive in the fiercely competitive age of YouTube and streaming

Lisa Nandy, the Culture Secretary, has said that nothing is off the table as the Government grapples with one of British broadcasting's biggest questions: how to fund the BBC as the future of the licence fee comes into sharp focus in the run-up to renewal of the BBC's royal charter, which expires in 2027. The BBC Director-General, Tim Davie, said in May: "We are not asking for the status quo. We want modernisation and reform. But in doing so, we must safeguard universality.

"All the funding models that have

been floated in the debate have their merits and drawbacks. But some, such as advertising or subscription, don't pass the test of building a universal, trusted public service. Beyond that, we keep an open mind. And we continue to actively explore all options that can make our funding model fairer, more modern and more sustainable."

At an RTS National Event held last month, media economist Mark Oliver, who was the BBC's first Director of Strategy, set the scene, reminding us that, for 10 years, BBC coffers have been dwindling as the licence fee has failed to match inflation. A vicious circle

ensued as both revenue and weekly reach – the total audience in a week – were locked in a downward spiral; by this metric, weekly reach for BBC TV had declined from 83% to 60% since 2014. Its audience share, however, remained high.

Oliver said there could be no serious debate on how to fund the BBC without first addressing what the scope of its activities should be (a point later echoed by panellist Tony Hall, a former BBC Director-General). He laid out alternatives to the licence fee: public funding through general taxation; a household charge; a progressive licence fee (the better off you are, the more you pay); or even a lottery. Or commercial funding via advertising or subscription, or a mix of the two. The latter, argued Oliver, was likely to erode the BBC's commitment to "universality", whereby everyone receives the same service.

An advertising model, said Oliver, also risked undermining ITV and Channels 4 and 5 – all public service broadcasters that are feeling the pinch as they compete with deep-pocketed US behemoths.

"What tends *not* to get discussed is hybrid funding," noted Oliver. "This is actually what happens at the moment, because the BBC earns quite a lot from commercial sources. Hybrid tends to be rejected because it's too



Grappling with the issue: Jake Kanter, Mike Darcey, Tony Hall, Caroline Dinenage and Mark Oliver at the RTS event

'I HOPE THE DEBATE THIS TIME CAN BE ABOUT PURPOSE, FUNCTION AND WHAT THIS AMAZING INSTITUTION CAN DO'

once again make payment of the licence fee compulsory. Darcey said. "The BBC never likes me saying this, but to all intents and purposes it is a subscription service. There's a price, a pool of content and you choose whether you want to pay. We don't call it that because we're still pretending it's not a subscription service. My instinct is that we will go round the houses on all these other things but the political will and courage to make a complex change will evaporate as we get close to the line, and we'll end up roughly where we are."

Darcey calculated that, if licence fee opt-outs were removed, the BBC's income would increase by 20%.

Tony Hall called for greater transparency in how the fee is awarded, recalling that he and a predecessor, Mark Thompson, were effectively mugged by Whitehall in the last two licence fee settlements as a deal was stitched up behind closed doors "You end up in a ferocious combat over the quantum of the licence fee over a period of days. That's not a grown-up way to run an organisation or to provide the money for the services we want."

Hall thinks a public debate is needed on what services the BBC provides before any decisions are taken on funding: "The licence fee needs to be reformed, but you can't have that debate before you've worked out what the BBC is for. You need to see the BBC in cultural terms."

Quoting Andy Haldane, the economist who has run the Royal Society of Arts since 2021, Hall said the BBC was "part of the social infrastructure". Speaking passionately, he continued: "I hope the debate this time round is about purpose and function and what this amazing cultural institution, which we're lucky to have, can do."

He reminded the audience of the soft power wielded by the World Service, and the BBC's importance in creating a sense of community through its local radio stations. "When Shirley Williams [the late Liberal Democrat peer who, as a Labour MP, served as a minister in the 1960s and 1970s] called it 'the best soft power since Shakespeare', she was spot on. If you've got local radio stations, you are part of the

social infrastructure. People in Cumbria say Radio Cumbria helps to define who we are."

The former DG wants an independent body set up to look at the BBC's purposes, how its income has fallen behind inflation and what we pay for other utilities. "The Government can then accept that or not, but at least there's a proper public debate."

He also thought the idea of consolidation among Britain's PSBs should be examined, including a possible merger between BBC Studios and Channel 4.

Caroline Dinenage, Chair of the Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport is a Conservative MP – but if the audience expected to hear BBC bashing, they had come to the wrong place.

She said the BBC needed to do better at telling its own story to the British public. "The BBC doesn't do a good enough job in selling itself and telling people why it's important."

Licence-fee payers needed to know how the BBC differed from the streamers and other public service broadcasters, said Dinenage. "In a world that is crazy and chaotic, we need trusted sources of information. The BBC has a global reputation for that, and we need to value that and sell that."

There was a consensus around the table that the licence fee would survive, but with some reform. Hall first came out in support of a progressive licence fee a couple of years ago. The devil, of course, will be in the detail. The fear inside Broadcasting House must be that the fee will be set at such a low level that the vicious circle of real revenue and audience decline will continue, leaving the BBC forced to make further cuts across the board.

The one dissenting voice on the panel was Mark Oliver, who predicted that the licence fee would become a household charge, albeit one with more concessions for the disadvantaged. ■

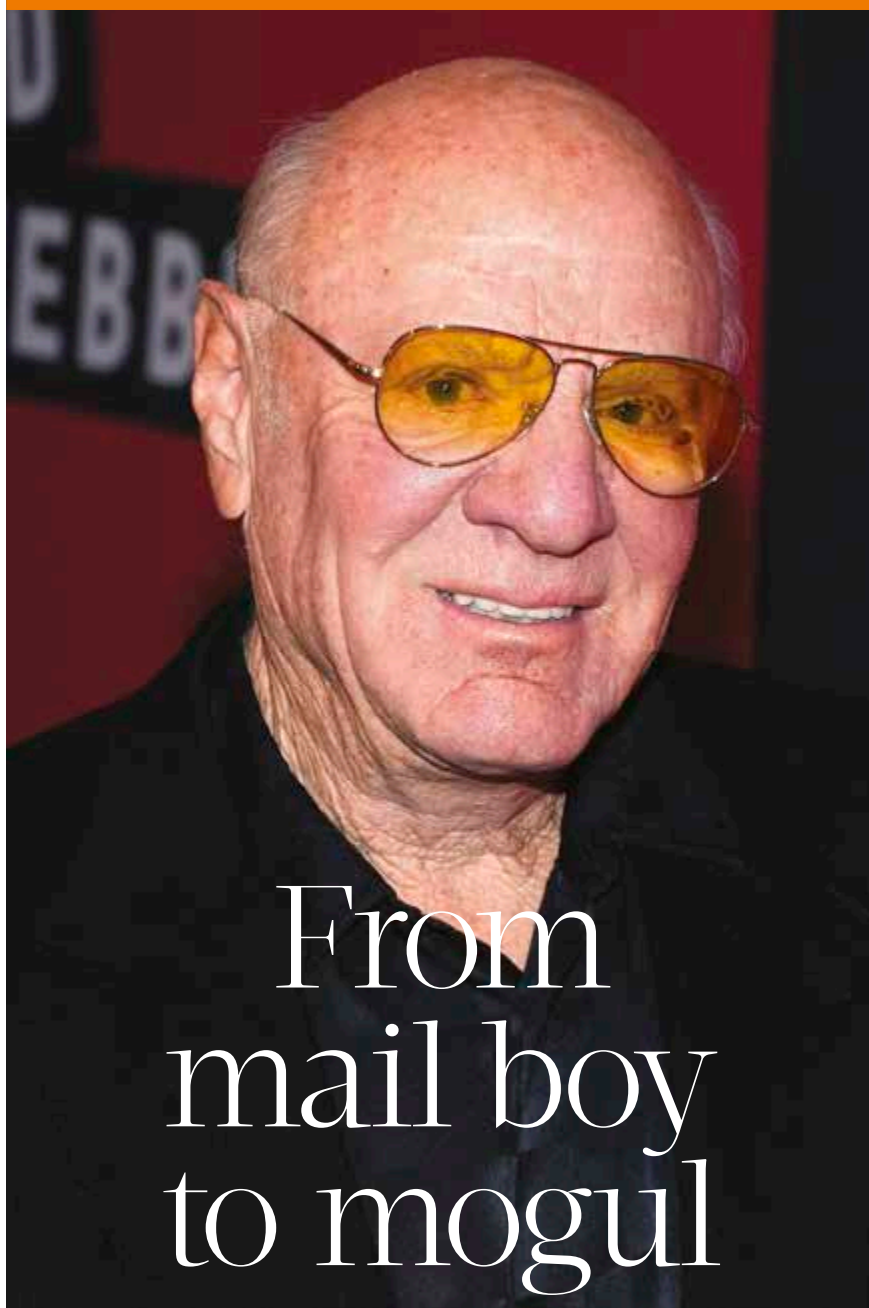
Report by Steve Clarke. 'The future of BBC funding' was an RTS National Event held at the Cavendish Conference Centre on 24 June. The debate was chaired by Jake Kanter, Investigations Editor at Deadline. Steve Clarke and Nigel Warner produced. Watch online at: youtu.be/h8FSiAqy0cA

complicated. It might create a two-tier public service and undermine long-term support for public funding because, if you start to grow your commercial funding, people chip away at your public funding. The hybrid options haven't been looked at as fully as they might have been."

Oliver described those who object to the licence fee as "a coalition of the unwilling", a far from homogeneous group. They include those on low incomes; people who don't use BBC services; those who think it provides poor value for money and that streamers give better value; free-marketeers, who object to the licence fee on principle; and those who see the BBC as too right- or left-wing. One recent trend is people who ask, "What does the BBC do for me?", rather than considering the benefits it brings to democratic society, a founding principle that still informs the BBC's ethos.

"Generally, the licence fee is seen as the least of all evils," said Oliver. "As for value for money, it depends on which survey you look at."

Mike Darcey, the former Chief Operating Officer of Sky, made a pithy if controversial point, suggesting that the BBC was already a subscription service. With greater numbers no longer paying the fee – around 17%, said Darcey – Tim Davie's objective was to



From mail boy to mogul

Barry Diller has been at the centre of the global entertainment world for decades. Now his memoir tells the full story. **Simon Shaps** takes a ringside seat

At the storied 92nd Street Y venue in New York, Barry Diller, now a sprightly 83, arrived on stage to a rapturous reception. Marking the publication of his memoir, the event featured a home crowd full of Manhattan media folk, some still active and some just enjoying proximity to the starry guest of honour.

Behind me sat a male model who had flown in from LA. Discovering that the elderly woman next to him worked “in entertainment”, he asked loudly:

“I have somebody on the west coast, but do you know any good agents in New York?” It was that kind of night.

Diller, the wunderkind TV executive turned digital trailblazer, had recently come out as gay and talked openly about his troubled childhood. Interviewed by his friend of some 30 years, CNN’s Anderson Cooper, Diller wisely-cracked, reeled out his fund of showbiz stories and delighted the audience, who rewarded him at the end of an hour with whoops and cheers. But there remained unanswered questions. Not *Who Knew*, the title of his

IT IS HARD
TO THINK
OF ANYONE,
CERTAINLY IN
UK MEDIA, TO
RIVAL DILLER

memoir, but what did he do exactly? And how did he do it?

It’s hard to think of anyone – certainly in UK media – who comes close to Diller. He has been at the centre of a succession of media revolutions, shaping the landscape, always somehow just ahead of the curve. At ABC, still in his early 20s, he pioneered the TV movie when nobody else thought the format would work on network TV. He devised the mini-series, delivering shows that gripped the US: *Rich Man, Poor Man*, *Roots* and *The Winds of War*.

At Paramount, which he ran aged just 32, he turned a failing movie studio into a creative powerhouse, lifting it to number one for seven years straight, with hits that included *Saturday Night Fever*, *Grease*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Terms of Endearment* and *Beverly Hills Cop*.

He had a hunch that the three broadcast networks in the US – memorably dubbed the “Three Blind Mice” by Ken Auletta – needed shaking up, and drove the creation of Fox.

“Around that time,” he writes insouciantly, “I began to think about starting a fourth television network.”

Diller was now only 37, with his hands full running a Hollywood studio, yet he still had time to dream. After a shaky start, he found hits like *Married... with Children* and *The Simpsons*, making upstart Fox the leading network.

Prompted by his long-term partner, the fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, he ventured out one day to an unlikely location near Philadelphia and fell in love with QVC and the idea of interactive shopping – despite programmes that “looked as if they were produced in Poland in the 1950s”. He saw the future... and ended up buying the business.

And before most of his peers had learned to send an email, he founded IAC, building a stellar group of more than 100 online businesses, with brands such as Expedia, Vimeo and Tinder, part of the Match Group.

There were setbacks along the way.

Alamy

As a teenager, he was fired from the school newspaper by Nora Ephron of *When Harry Met Sally...* fame. But if you are going to get fired by anybody, you could do a lot worse than Ephron.

He went toe-to-toe with a succession of media titans, generally more than holding his own. Early on, he negotiated a film package for ABC with Charlie Bluhdorn, chairman of Gulf + Western, owner of Paramount. Bluhdorn was many levels above Diller's pay grade but sensed that the 23-year-old was a special talent. He eventually brought him to Paramount to run the studio.

Over half a century, Diller went on to grapple with pretty well anyone who was anyone in media, from Sumner Redstone to Rupert Murdoch, Comcast's Brian Roberts and Liberty's John Malone. The memoir offers a ringside seat at all those contests.

It is to Diller's credit that these war stories from the frontline of Hollywood don't feel self-aggrandising: he writes too well, and too honestly, to fall into that trap.

In the time-honoured tradition of Hollywood, Diller's dizzying ascent began in the mailroom of the William Morris talent agency. But once there, he chose an unlikely course. "I wasn't really working, I was studying."

He spent long hours in the treasure house that was the William Morris archive: "It was a huge place with hundreds of metal files that housed the entire history of the entertainment industry." He claims that he read every file – every contract – from "A to Z",



Diller's Fox network had a huge hit in *Married... with Children*

Alamy

gaining along the way a profound understanding of the industry.

While at Paramount he greenlit *The Last Tycoon*, based on the book by F Scott Fitzgerald. In the novel, the central character, Monroe Stahr, (played in the film by Robert De Niro) is based on a boy wonder from an earlier era, studio head Irving Thalberg, whom Fitzgerald met when he went to work as screenwriter in Hollywood. Stahr/Thalberg is said to understand "the whole equation" – every aspect of the film business, creative and commercial.

There is ample evidence in this memoir that the same can be said of Diller. Perhaps that all began when he buried himself deep in the William Morris Agency's archives, while his mailroom contemporaries, including David Geffen (the film producer and

record executive who became a life-long friend), were running messages, delivering flowers and ingratiating themselves with the agents they aspired to be.

The independent producer and former BBC executive Michael Jackson, himself something of a wunderkind, was introduced to Diller by Ari Emanuel of WME. Trusting his ability to spot talent, Diller hired him as President of Programming at USA Entertainment and then President of Programming for IAC. Interviewed for this piece, Jackson points out that among his greatest achievements is the "myth of Barry Diller", a media persona underpinned by "candour, sagacity and independence". And, critically for Jackson, insatiable curiosity.

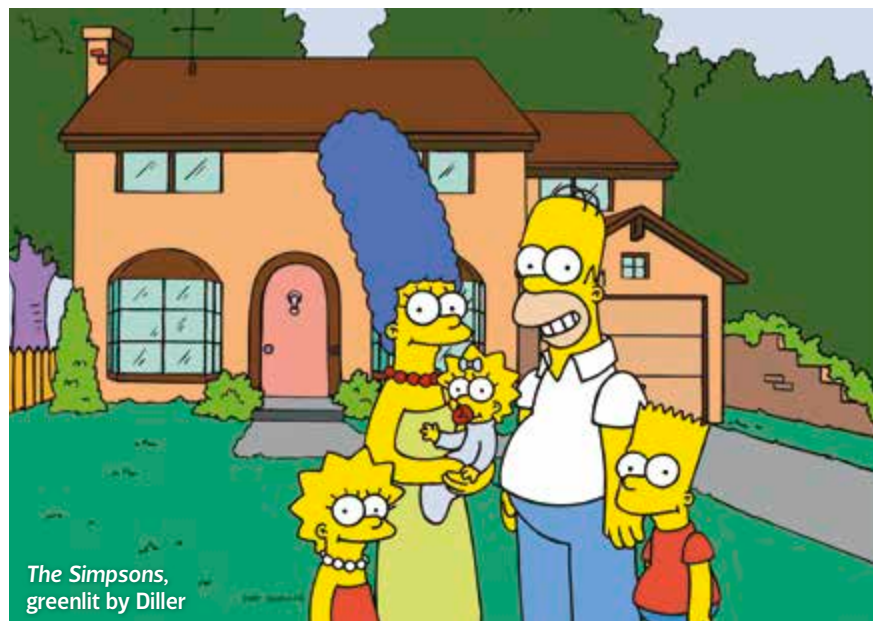
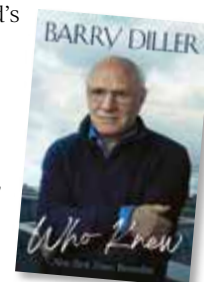
Diller remains curious about the future shape of entertainment. If there is a note of wistfulness about his assessment of the industry he did so much to shape, that is because the beating heart of the book, and his undoubted first love, is entertainment.

He writes that we are witnessing the "final throes" of the "end of Hollywood as we know it".

He goes on: "All is now controlled and dominated by the tech overlords. That nightly roar of the lion of MGM is now a whimper, a vassal to the retailer Amazon."

Of all Hollywood's big beasts, it is perhaps Diller who has roared loudest and longest. ■

Who Knew by Barry Diller is published by Simon & Schuster.



The Simpsons, greenlit by Diller

Sky

'Seminal trash': It all kicks off in *Footballers' Wives*

You are awful... but we like you!

Footballers' Wives

It was a case of life imitating art. While England's "golden generation" flopped at the 2006 World Cup in Germany, their wives and girlfriends – WAGs – were tearing it up in Baden-Baden. "Hooligans with credit cards," said the tabloids, lapping up their high-end retail therapy and champagne benders.

Art, though, in the form of ITV's *Footballers' Wives* (2002–06), was different class – Posh Spice, Cheryl Cole and Coleen (Rooney to be) et al had nothing on the antics of Tanya, Chardonnay and Amber in a show accurately described by *The Guardian* as a "semi-nal slice of TV trash". Storylines – fake

Some shows are just so bad that they're good. Television writers pick the best of the worst

boobs catching fire at a hen do, a baby smothered to death by a dog – were knowingly ludicrous. Most memorably, Tanya Turner, played with relish by Zöe Lucker, shagged Frank, boss of the fictional Premier League club Earls Park, to death after plying him with Viagra, booze and coke.

Tanya even transferred briefly,

football-style, to *Bad Girls* when a drugs conviction saw her banged up in the ITV drama's Larkhall prison.

Four series in, viewers were beginning to tire of the show's excesses and switching off. The producers went for broke, signing Joan Collins – "Queen of Mean" Alexis Carrington Colby from *Dynasty*, one of the inspirations for *Footballers' Wives* – for what proved to be its fifth and final outing.

Collins played Eva de Wolfe, a "twisted psycho bitch" (takes one to know one, Tanya), who was shagging her adopted son.

Classy until the very end.

Matthew Bell

Bad Girls

From the same Shed Productions stable as *Footballers' Wives*, ITV's compelling melodrama saw idealistic HMP Larkhall governor Helen Stewart (*River City*'s Simone Lahbib) falling headlong for charismatic cop-killer inmate Nikki Wade, played by Mandana Jones. It was the beating heart of the first three series and, for once, this story didn't end in the Dead Lesbian Lover trope.

But from series four, plots became wilder as "screw" Jim Fenner battled with queen-of-the-cons Yvonne Atkins to become G Wing's top dog. While badass Atkins became the wing's



From WAG to old lag: Tanya in *Bad Girls*

matriarch, Fenner turned into a stop-at-nothing sadist in his bid to become governor. He was voted one of TV's Top 10 Bastards in a 2002 poll.

Fenner finally dispatched Atkins by locking her in the creepy disused – and hitherto non-existent – execution wing. Attempts on Fenner's life went from a tame broken bottle in the gut, via spiked cheese straws and peroxide-soaked candle wicks to a poisoned thorn fired from a blowpipe. And in an hilarious twist on "I am Spartacus", each would-be murderer stood up and claimed "I killed Fenner".

At times the going got heavy, but the show's creators never shied away from real issues affecting women in prison, often there because of abusive men.

Carole Solazzo

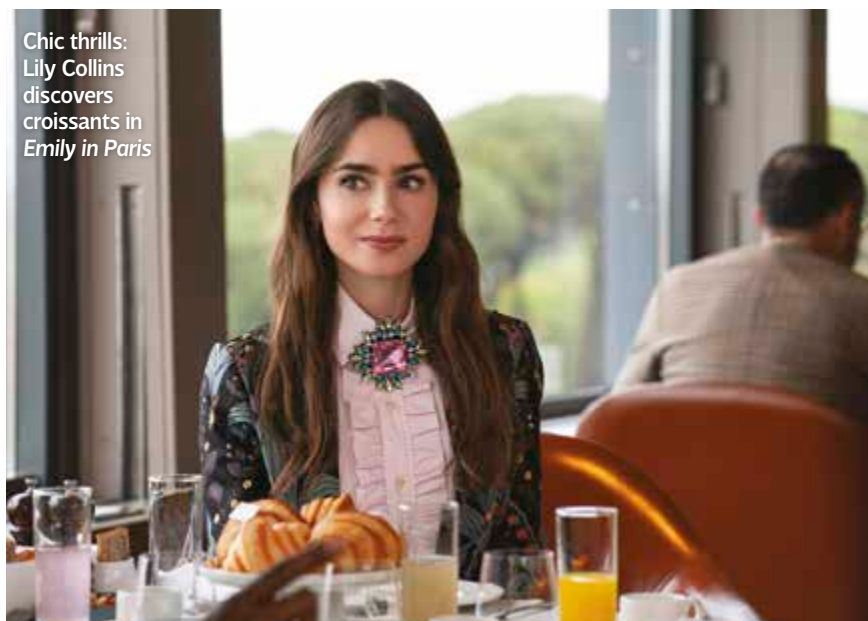
Emily in Paris

Ah, Paris! Rip-off cafes, bed bugs, wildcat strikes, gendarmes firing water cannon at rioting gilets-jaunes. Well, you'll see none of that gritty realism in *Emily in Paris*. What you will see is a thin, beautiful ingenue, straight off the plane from Chicago, conquering the city of love with consummate ease. All while speaking not a word of French beyond s'il vous plaît and ooh là là. Never mind la vie en rose – this is la vie en rose-tinted glasses.

Thanks to all that, *Emily in Paris* came in for beaucoup de flak from the start, not least from the French. It's not surprising that they objected to the countless clichés and the blatant American exceptionalism that sees our heroine (Lily Collins) run rings round her more senior colleagues at a Paris marketing agency. The American has the je ne sais quoi while the French bumble round like Inspector Clouseau.

That said, Darren Star's series has won huge audiences (it was crowned Netflix's most-watched show in 2022) and has already run for 40 episodes over four series since its debut in 2020. A fifth outing is on the way, with Emily

Chic thrills:
Lily Collins
discovers
croissants in
Emily in Paris



Netflix

moving to Rome (posing, of course, on a Vespa). But is it really so mauvais? I just watched series four episode five, in which Emily's agency runs a campaign for a miracle face-cream that turns out – after being smeared on everyone's faces – to actually be lube (à la KY Jelly). Which was rather amusant.

As for the stereotypes, *Emily* is no different from London-based romcoms that boast red buses, black cabs and Big Ben. It lacks the charm and whimsy of *Amélie* and the satirical delights of *Call My Agent*, but for half-hour bites of escapism, *Emily* is OK by me.

James Bennett

Selling Sunset

There is something grotesque about the premise of this hit Netflix reality TV series: twins Jason and Brett Oppenheim preside over their LA real-estate agency, staffed by Amazonian women who pack Pekinese pooches into handbags

before heading out to secure giant “duplexes” for their clients. In between endless catfights regarding what Mary knew about what Christine hid from Chrishell, they rattle off stats about square footage and planning approvals without breaking a nail. If the twins – identically gym-fresh,

snow-teethed, small and bald – are like something out of a fairytale, their employees are as razor-focused as the guitarists in a Robert Palmer video.

There's a lot to get cross about, not least the contrived conflict that could be sorted in a moment if the cameras weren't rolling, the shamelessly ostentatious displays of wealth in a town where a Ferrari-sized garage is considered a necessity and the lack of an infinity pool a deal-breaker.

But between all the beefs and senseless luxury of the property porn backdrop, these women – some single mothers, all self-employed – are working their toned butts off to secure their own little piece of paradise. And, after eight series, they have most emphatically earned it.

The success of *Selling Sunset* has spawned a dozen imitators, from *Buying Beverly Hills* (similar houses, bigger gardens), *The Agency* (adding Parisian family business dynamics) and the unwatchable *Buying London* (mercifully cancelled after a single series). But these prickly, pretty women and their pint-sized bosses continue to dominate the market.

Caroline Frost



Cheeky! An intimate moment in *Selling Sunset*

Netflix

ITV's sweeping daytime revamp has put the health of the sector in question. **Tara Conlan** looks back to Roland Rat... and forward to an uncertain future



ITV's *This Morning* team:
Ben Shephard, Cat Deeley,
Alison Hammond and
Dermot O'Leary

ITV

What next for breakfast TV?

When ITV revealed in May that it was revamping its daytime schedules and production, many headlines predicted that breakfast TV was toast.

From January, *Good Morning Britain* will be extended by 30 minutes and, rather than being produced by ITV Studios, will be made by a team within ITV News at ITN's base on London's Gray's Inn Road. This will bring all ITV's national newsgathering together.

ITV also wants *This Morning*, *Lorraine* and *Loose Women* to be produced by one team, with the latter two running not weekly but on a "seasonal basis" for 30 weeks of the year, and *Good Morning Britain* gaining an extra half-hour when *Lorraine* is off air.

Staff are currently being consulted about the proposals, which will cut around 220 jobs. Undoubtedly, ITV has to adapt as viewing habits change – but what does its plan reveal about breakfast TV today and its future?

The genre's history throws light on ITV's current predicament. Former ITN Chief Executive Stewart Purvis sees its

roots in a decision by ex-Carlton Television boss Michael Green more than 30 years ago. In the early 1990s, when the ITV breakfast franchise (held at the time by TV-am) came up for renewal, Purvis says the bidders included a "north bank" consortium (including ITN) and a "south bank" consortium, which featured London Weekend Television on London's South Bank.

In a move that, says Purvis, "has never been fully explained, the south bank bid was increased the very morning of the process and outbid the north bank", so ITN lost out. Purvis claims: "Michael Green was in the north bank bid and wanted to be in the south bank bid as well. So he leaked the figure to the south bank [team] and they increased their bid. Carlton was given a 20% stake in the winning franchise. So that's how we come to this bizarre situation of two production houses in business in the morning."

Breakfast TV was trialled by

Yorkshire TV in 1977, but went national with the BBC's *Breakfast Time* and TV-am in 1983.

Former TV-am boss Clive Jones explains that the genre has always been based around human behaviour. Jones and Director of Programmes Greg Dyke made TV-am a success by seeing the programme "as a schedule rather than a single programme. We consciously built it backwards". The idea was to look at viewers' routines, such as school drop-off times, and build "thematic" segments based "on who the audience was". They also earmarked school holidays, introducing the puppet Roland Rat to bring in mothers watching with children.

Dyke recalls: "It was the funniest year of my life. I've never laughed so much. It was sham-bolic. We had no money. And we had a writ pile in the corner from all the people who hadn't been paid!"

Jones says Dyke believed that a big news story would dominate



BBC

“the agenda throughout the day; if there wasn’t a great news story, you relied on the couch”.

So news has always been at the heart of breakfast TV. Jones contends that ITV is becoming like American networks that have “breakfast as part of their news division. Actually, ITN was originally going to be the news provider for TV-am [but] negotiations broke down.” Jones adds: “It’s logical that breakfast sits within news... and as things get tougher, it’s not surprising they’re moving away from a standalone to an integrated model.”

Innovation has served breakfast TV well in the past. Duncan Gray, founder of production company Twenty Six 03, helped create the groundbreaking Planet 24 format *The Big Breakfast* for Channel 4. He explains now that it was “not a television show; it was a radio show that happened to be on television”. He had earlier worked with Chris Evans on the Greater London Radio show *The Greenhouse* and admired Radio 1’s “zoo format” break-

fast TV now is that the first thing people do when they wake is pick up their phone”. They are likely to be checking news and weather online, and have “so many content choices”, such as podcasts or catch-up TV, as well as Greg James’s successful Radio 1 breakfast show. The advantages TV once had have “been eroded”.

In the past, Gray adds, Johnny Vaughan’s *Big Breakfast* paper review was so compelling that it made viewers “late for work”. And when *Good Morning Britain* had Piers Morgan presenting, “I watched because Piers was going to say something to irritate the

bacon. *BBC Breakfast* also won the news coverage Bafta this year – the first UK breakfast show to do so – for a postmasters’ discussion in the wake of ITV drama *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*.

A senior BBC News insider says that *BBC Breakfast* has the time and freedom to explore subjects in depth and build up relationships, as it has done with families affected by the Southport attacks. They maintain that breakfast TV is as relevant now as 42 years ago, and still plays a significant role in people’s lives. The genre also creates widely popular figures, such as weather presenter Carol Kirkwood (pictured on facing page). Marcus Rashford’s *BBC Breakfast* interview in 2020 – which led to a political U-turn on scrapping free school meals vouchers in school summer holidays – is evidence, says the BBC insider, of the power of breakfast TV.

Citing its consultation process, ITV declined to add to the statement already made by Managing Director, Media and Entertainment, Kevin Lygo:

‘TV-AM WAS SHAMBOLIC. IT WAS THE FUNNIEST YEAR OF MY LIFE’

GREG DYKE



Star-studded: Anna Ford, Michael Parkinson, David Frost, Angela Rippon and Robert Kee on the TV-am sofa in 1983

Alamy

fast show, hosted by Simon Mayo.

“Look at the structure of *The Big Breakfast* running orders: we did exactly the same as the Radio 1 breakfast show but, instead of playing records, we had Chris Evans and Gaby Roslin talking and features such as ‘Whose Washing Line Is It Anyway?’”

Bob Geldof “had the idea to call it *The Big Breakfast*”, and Planet 24 co-founder Charlie Parsons wanted the show to feature “real people in a house, not in a TV studio”.

Gray thinks that “the challenge for

shit out of me, but I needed to know”.

A key plus for breakfast TV has always been that it is live, creating tabloid headlines and viral moments (such as Susanna Reid’s interview in June with Robert Jenrick, the Shadow Secretary of State for Justice). ITV claims that *Good Morning Britain* has scored a peak daily reach of 2.2 million. Looking at viewing figures rather than reach, the number is around 700,000, with *BBC Breakfast* surpassing its rival at more than 1 million. So breakfast still brings home ratings

“Daytime is a really important part of what we do, and these... changes will enable us to continue to deliver a schedule providing viewers with the news, debate and discussion they love from the presenters they know and trust, as well generating savings which will allow us to reinvest across the programme budget in other genres.”

Jones concludes: “The changes ITV has made in restructuring the shows reflect the challenge being faced by terrestrial broadcasters, not only in the UK, but all around the world.” ■

Ready to roll: David Baillie at work on the Netflix series *Life on Our Planet*



Frozen out

A new cold war is under way, and this time it's a battle for control of the Arctic. Yet David Baillie's documentary on the subject can't find a TV slot here in his homeland. **Graeme Thompson** reports

A timely documentary investigating military escalation among superpowers in the Arctic is making headlines around the world. But not in the UK, where it was produced.

Award-winning wildlife cameraman and director David Baillie pitched the story to British broadcasters three years ago but was advised that, without a celebrity presenter, the show would never fly. So, with the help of a crowdfunder appeal, his own savings and a degree of chutzpah, Baillie set about making the film himself.

It took him three years of research and location shoots in five countries before he finally persuaded distributor Poppy McAlister at TVF International to take *Arming the Arctic*. Now it is being shown in 23 countries... and Baillie hasn't given up on the 50-minute film being picked up in Britain.

"The news channels are suddenly awash with reports of what's happening in the Arctic," said the founder of Gateshead-based Wildcat Films. "But

I have the story right here. It's a tense, fast-moving situation, with all the superpowers jockeying to take advantage of unforeseen access to sea routes, rare minerals and fish because of the retreating ice. And I could update the current version of the film if anyone wanted it."

Baillie got the idea for the project at the Sheffield International

Documentary Festival in 2021. "I made myself unpopular by saying there was a need to make climate change films that connected with climate sceptics. It was clear that deniers like Trump don't really care about drowning polar bears but care a lot about national security. I thought: let's make a film that looks at how climate change is affecting security and defence issues."

But despite his track record of Bafta and Emmy wins and his pioneering work with aerial photography for many of David Attenborough's natural history blockbusters, broadcasters showed no interest. "I'd been out to the Arctic and gathered enough to do



Filming for *Arming the Arctic* aboard a Norwegian Coastguard helicopter in Svalbard

David Baillie

a sizzle, but with no Michael Palin or Chris Packham in front of the camera, there were no takers. I'd have had better luck pitching *Love Island on Ice*!

"The History Channel suggested that if I angled the film around how the military cook in temperatures of -20C, they might be interested. But that wasn't the film I wanted to make."

Filming on his own, without a commission or a production team, was one challenge. Another became evident as Russia, China, Nato and the US raced to gain economic and military advantage in the once pristine wilderness.

"I had to be careful not to mention climate change to the Americans," said Baillie, who has worked in both polar regions as well as deserts, jungles and war zones. "One of the reasons Trump is interested in the Arctic, Greenland and Canada is because parts of the ice cap are melting, providing access to previously inaccessible resources and sea routes. But it was made clear to me that no one from the US would talk about climate warming."

Baillie – as producer, cameraman

'THERE WERE NO TAKERS. I'D HAVE HAD BETTER LUCK PITCHING LOVE ISLAND ON ICE!'

important to China because of its need for new fishing grounds. China is building more ice-breakers than the US and Europe combined."

His film lays bare the threat of global conflict triggered by climate change. "War has already come to the Arctic. Much of the Russians' bombing of Ukraine originates there. And the Ukrainians are retaliating by using drones to attack Russian planes and airfields in the Arctic circle. Russia is ahead of the game in terms of hardware and military investment. The West is playing catch-up."

Thanks to his previous work on projects including *Frozen Planet* and *Planet Earth*, Baillie was able to use

"Over the three years it took to shoot the film, I only once had a camera assistant. This was for filming on a Nato AWACS [surveillance aircraft] and a US Marine Corps C-130 [transport aircraft] out of Norway. I don't normally approve of unpaid work experience but a family acquaintance was so determined to get into TV that I relented. Not only was she brilliant, but – partly on the back of the experience – she now works as a staff producer at the BBC."

His crowdfunding site raised the £14,000 he needed for flights, carnets and insurance. "I put in around £10,000 of my own money and TVF paid for me to go to Brussels to get an interview with a German admiral who was Nato chief-of-staff. It was done at the request of a German broadcaster that was the first to take the film. And he was good value, talking about the days when the northern sea route was completely blocked by ice."

"I would recommend crowdfunding to small indies. It was surprisingly easy. It helps if you have a passion and a track record – in my case, around climate change and the environment. I knew some people in environmental groups and they were generous."

"Jonathon Porritt [the veteran environmentalist] put in £500, and I got a substantial sum from the Sustainable Earth Institute. I'm so grateful to everyone who supported the crowdfunder. The film wouldn't have been made without them."

One way to cut costs was to use an AI voiceover. "To date, I don't think anyone has noticed," he said. "I couldn't afford to use a professional voiceover artist. I came across ElevenLabs, where you pay a subscription and choose the kind of voice you need. You then write your voiceover script and, if it doesn't sound right, you get them to re-record until you're happy with it."

"It was particularly useful when you had to change things. For example, I used a Nato library image of a French aircraft carrier. When it was shown in Germany, I got feedback that the vessel was actually Italian. It took me 10 minutes to change it on the AI voiceover. The technology is impressive and it's going to get even better." ■

David Baillie will be in conversation at an RTS screening of *Arming the Arctic* at the Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle, at 6pm on 15 July.



'Everyone's piling in': Baillie (right) with the crew of a USAF KC-135 in the Arctic

and editor – had to look elsewhere for those interviews. He came up with an impressive cast of contributors including Professor Katarzyna Zysk (Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies), Professor Peter Roberts (Royal United Services Institute), Thórdís Kolbrún Gylfadóttir (former Icelandic Foreign Minister) and climate scientist Ella Gilbert.

"The scale of what's happening just doesn't get talked about," he said. "The international rules on territory are a bit shaky, so everyone's piling in. In 2023, Russia and China held their first joint military exercise in the Arctic. The opening up of new sea routes is vitally

high-ranking contacts to gain access to military exercises, surveillance patrols and research stations. "I had spent four seasons with the Royal Navy on an ice-patrol ship while filming for the BBC, so I was able to gather some suitably glowing references from the various captains I had sailed with," he said.

At every stage, Baillie travelled with seven cases of kit. Hauling it around was exhausting. "I'm obsessive about creating the best cinematography, whatever the environment. No handheld lightweight cameras for me. I'd lug around a full Arri rig, prime lenses, a slider, two tripods, lights and a sound kit. Completely mad."

USAF

RTS Student Television Awards 2025

Sponsored by



The ceremony at the IET in central London on 13 June was hosted by rapper, author and broadcaster **Guvna B**



Anomaly Undergraduate Animation;
Undergraduate Craft Skills –
Production Design; Writing

UNDERGRADUATE CATEGORIES

Undergraduate Animation

Anomaly

Artūrs Vobļikovs
(Middlesex University)
'A commendable mix of styles and compellingly mysterious. Subtle and elegant comedy injects a short that cleverly touches on serious subjects.'

Nominees

- **Clubulon** James Rix
(Norwich University of the Arts)
- **ESC** Olivia Timms, Pam Simoes Gomez & Osian Jones (School of Digital Arts, Manchester Metropolitan University)

Undergraduate Drama

Gas & Electricity

Daniel Kelly, Grace Bisland, William Duguid Cox & Kelly Halpin (University of the West of Scotland)
'Driven by two outstanding performances and a script that says as much in silence as it does in dialogue, this film stood out for its emotional depth and effortless shifts in perspective.'

Nominees

- **Sub Rosa** Isabel Hall, Robin Irvine, Becks Bouron & team
(Falmouth University)
- **Trapped** Glodi Kuba-Kuba, Conor Gallagher, Archie Barker, Jake Perret & team (University of Salford)

Undergraduate Entertainment and Comedy Drama

The Face

Alex Russell, Charlotte Davis, Quan Luong, Imogen Lily Christie & team (University of Gloucestershire)
'Gloriously silly, with slick production, a funny central idea, strong comic dialogue and a surprising ending.'

Nominees

- **Bricked Up** Max James Walker, Xavier Sonski, Tom Carrick & team (University of Salford)
- **Gnomegeddon** Cosmo Bawler, Jack Horder, Tom Chawner & team (Falmouth University)



Guvna B Host

Richard Kendal



Happy Death Undergraduate
Factual – Long Form;
Undergraduate Craft
Skills – Editing

University of Staffordshire



The Face
Undergraduate
Entertainment and
Comedy Drama

Richard Kendal



Outsiders Undergraduate
Factual – Short Form

London College of Communication, UAL

Undergraduate Factual – Long Form

Happy Death

Ekaterina Trufanova & Darcy Wootton-Davies (University of Staffordshire)
'A really stylish and well-executed film. Each shot felt carefully thought through in terms of what the film-makers wanted the audience to feel.'

Nominees

► **HUNT** Thalia Saleh, David Merritt, Ed Shaw, Charlie Ord & Alex Weir (University of York)

► **Subzero Salvation** Ethan Dear, Alex Lichtenauer, Meena Annamalai, Ronja Putensen & Antoaneta Ninovska (University of Stirling)

Undergraduate Factual – Short Form

Outsiders

Sharleen Sarzuelo Dydland, Lyam Dara, Tom Fowles, Sierra Fofanah & Marco Chan (London College of Communication, University of the Arts London)
'Strong storytelling, sensitive handling of the subject matter, excellent casting and technical execution made for an insightful and beautifully made piece.'

Nominees

► **Clucked** Dean Hamami & Drin Rrahmani (Leeds Arts University)
► **Oj Tato** Natalia Baczynski, Beth Lindsay, Eva Magdić Govedarica & Jennifer Morrison (Edinburgh Napier University)

Undergraduate Journalism

Hairdressing's Forgotten Clients

Shanai Dunlinson (University of Leeds)
'The jury loved the clever shot framing and creative use of graphics to explore this under-reported issue. The reporter's personal connection made it a compelling watch.'

Nominees

► **Grassroots Rugby** Christian Morante (University of Leeds)

► **That's News to Me** Broadcast Production Class of 2025 (Queen's University Belfast)

Undergraduate Saving the Planet On the Red List

Mathilde van Ooijen, Andrea Costa, Carla Basu, Sean Burns & Federica Massini (University of the West of Scotland)
‘This presenter-led piece had lots of personality and impressive camerawork. The jurors liked the fact that the animal subject of the film is not normally centre stage.’

Nominees

► **Go Fish!** Annalena Ulvee, Kara Harvey-Hill & Sophia Vypalova-Simon (Leeds Arts University)

► **One Woman's Green Revolution** Callum Felice, James Smith, Ben Fry, Will Cann & James Gibson (Southampton Solent University)

Undergraduate Craft Skills – Camerawork

Archie Barker (University of Salford)

Trapped
‘Strategically placed camera angles created immersive, fast-paced storytelling. A compelling narrative with clear ambition and innovation.’

Undergraduate Craft Skills – Editing

Darcy Wootton-Davies (University of Staffordshire)

Happy Death
‘A brilliant display of craftsmanship. Every cut was purposeful, steering the audience with precision and effortless pacing.’

Undergraduate Craft Skills – Production Design

Artūrs Vobļikovs (Middlesex University)

Anomaly
‘Visually captivating and full of flair. Amazing sets were rich with detail and dynamic elements. The colour palette stood out, enhancing the storytelling.’

Undergraduate Craft Skills – Sound

Osian Jones (School of Digital Arts, Manchester Metropolitan University)
ESC

‘A sonic delight showcasing a full range of ability and thoughtfully crafted throughout. Strong vocal work added both depth and clarity.’



Hairdressing's Forgotten Clients
Undergraduate Journalism



Gas & Electricity Undergraduate Drama

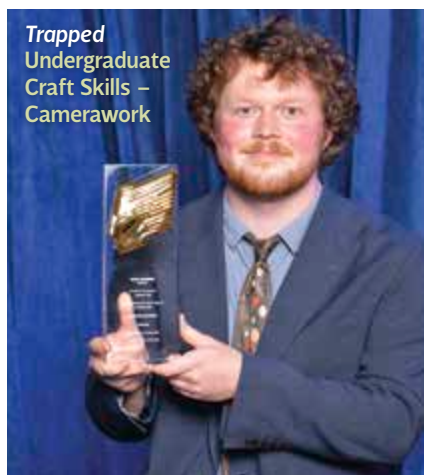


Anomaly Undergraduate Craft Skills – Production Design; Writing; Undergraduate Animation



On the Red List
Undergraduate Saving the Planet

University of the West of Scotland

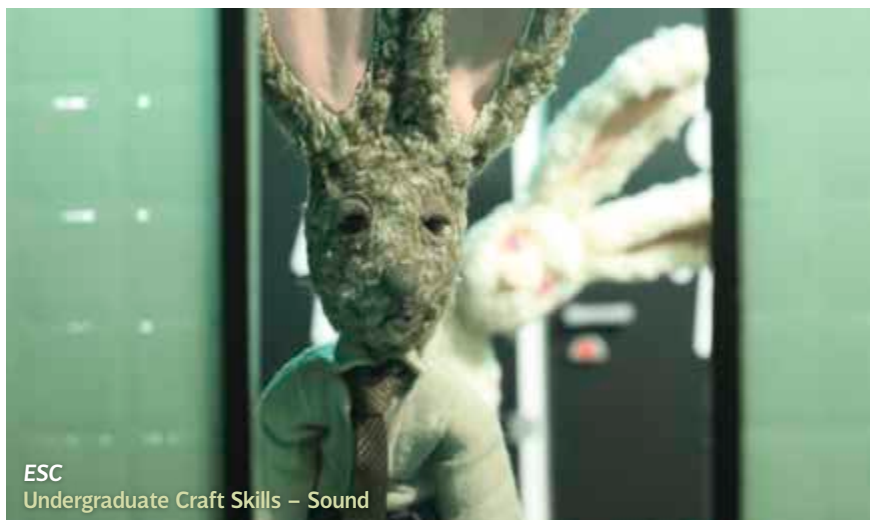


Trapped
Undergraduate Craft Skills – Camerawork



Happy Death
Undergraduate Factual – Long Form; Undergraduate Craft Skills – Editing

Richard Kendal



ESC
Undergraduate Craft Skills – Sound

Manchester Metropolitan University

Undergraduate Craft Skills – Writing

Artūrs Vobļikovs (Middlesex University)

Anomaly

‘An original script with charm and strong character development, fresh, authentic dialogue and a clever twist – all delivered in a short space.’

POSTGRADUATE CATEGORIES

Postgraduate Animation

Dragfox

Lisa Ott, Owen Thomas, John Cooney & team (National Film and Television School – NFTS)

‘Beautiful, all-singing, all-dancing animation, from the props and lighting to the stop-motion itself. A story with complex and sensitive themes.’

Nominees

► **Adiós** José Prats, Bernardo Angeletti, Natalia Kyriacou, Aurora Melpignano & team (NFTS)

► **Bunnyhood** Mansi Maheshwari, Ashionye Ogene, Anna Moore, James Davis & team (NFTS)

Postgraduate Drama

Latcho Drom (Good Road)

Lottie Graham, Victoria González Rocamora, Essi Hyrkkä, Lauren Wynter & team (NFTS)

‘Visually gorgeous. The jury admired the immersion into a community that isn’t widely represented. Nuanced performances and the casting of real-life brothers gave emotional depth.’

Nominees

► **Rock, Paper, Scissors** Franz Böhm, Hayder Hoozeer, Hsien Yu Niu & Shivani Bhawnani (NFTS)

► **Trouble** Arpita Ashok, Sarah Blok, Owen Cant, Ben Sales & team (NFTS)

Postgraduate Entertainment and Comedy Drama

Ministry of Enigmatic Affairs

Marina Fistal & Karan Dhar (NFTS)

‘A really polished and hilarious show that delivers on its promise, with funny casting and excellent conception.’

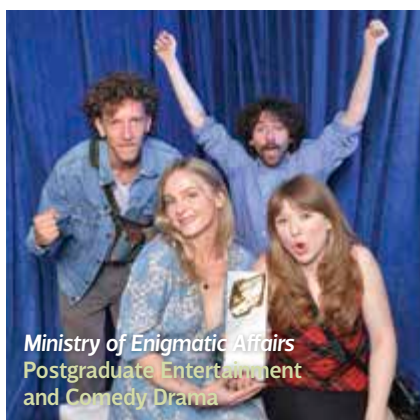
Nominees

► **Bongo’s Big Adventure** Tamzin Murray, Matt Branstion, Jake Duncan, Matthieu Levy & Charli Mackie (NFTS)

► **The Good, the Dad & the Ugly** Natalia Alejarra, Chiara Schreder, Helena Gonzalez & Beatrix Gerencser (NFTS)

NFTS

Queen’s University Belfast



Ministry of Enigmatic Affairs
Postgraduate Entertainment
and Comedy Drama

Richard Kendal



milk Postgraduate Factual –
Long Form: Postgraduate Craft
Skills – Editing; Writing

Richard Kendal



Dragfox Postgraduate Animation



Leave Only Footprints
Postgraduate Factual – Short Form

Postgraduate Factual – Long Form

milk

Miranda Stern, Ashionye Ogene, Yiwei Pu, Liam Sharpe & team (NFTS)

‘Close to perfection. Layer upon layer of complex storytelling pulled the audience through every twist and turn of this authored narrative, making it utterly absorbing.’

Nominees

► **Ascend** Alistair Bibby
(University of Salford)

► **Kiwi Farms: The Worst Website You’ve Never Heard Of** Fi McBean & Alice Horrell
(City, University of London)

Postgraduate Factual – Short Form

Leave Only Footprints

Philip Denvir
(Queen’s University Belfast)

‘Beautiful shooting and editing, a strong use of archive and engaging sound design drew the audience into this topical piece.’

Nominees

► **Is This It?** Somerset Phaedrus, Andre Leo, Katie Ellwood, Sarah-Louise Davila & team (NFTS)

► **My Heart is Broken** Helen Lambert, Sam Rothera, Nick Smyth, Cameron Mole & Cameron Ward (NFTS)

Postgraduate Journalism

Lewisham: Children’s Education in Crisis Due to Poor Housing

Mathilde Hourticq & Rajeshwari Kashyap
(City, University of London)

‘Impressive access, strong voices and excellent graphics gave all the ingredients of an impactful TV news report.’

Nominees

► **Artificial Intimacy** William Goodrich, Lilly Croucher & Laura Howes
(City, University of London)

► **Project Mbappé: A Path to the Pros?** Kevin Cremen, Esme Jones & Ella-Jane Coxwell (City, University of London)

Postgraduate Saving the Planet

Beyond the Bay

Daniel Green, Oliver Cummins, Bettina Zironi & Nir Perlman (NFTS)
‘A standout film with a great sense of authorship and vision, as well as a brilliant use of sound and knockout cinematography.’

Nominees

► **A Hole With a View** Felix Prater, Beatrice de Trenqualye & Benet Serra Reche (NFTS)

► **One Last Farm** Nikki Dodd
(University of the West of England)



Latcho Drom (Good Road)
Postgraduate Drama

Richard Kendal



Beyond the Bay Postgraduate
Saving the Planet; Postgraduate
Craft Skills – Camerawork

NFTS



**Lewisham: Children’s Education
in Crisis Due to Poor Housing**
Postgraduate Journalism

City, University of London



milk Postgraduate Factual – Long Form;
Postgraduate Craft Skills – Editing; Writing

Postgraduate Craft Skills – Camerawork

Daniel Green & Oliver Cummins (NFTS)

Beyond the Bay

‘A strong soundscape, breathtaking landscape shots and use of black and white highlighted beauty and destruction in the same frame, amplifying island life under climate change.’

Postgraduate Craft Skills – Editing

Yiwei Pu (NFTS)

milk

‘Masterful editing of the touching and sometimes chaotic storytelling of the film’s principal character made the narrative feel seamless, holding the viewer’s attention throughout.’

Postgraduate Craft Skills – Production Design

Aurora Melpignano (NFTS)

Adiós

‘Phenomenal set design and demarcation of internal and external environments made the film’s stop-motion world feel more tangible than many live-action films.’

Postgraduate Craft Skills – Sound

Bryony Lear & Marcin Mazurek (NFTS)

Rock, Paper, Scissors

‘The sound design was intrinsic to the film’s unique and textured world, leaving the audience feeling right in the heart of the trenches.’

Postgraduate Craft Skills – Writing

Miranda Stern (NFTS)

milk

‘Layering multiple storylines can be tricky, especially when you’re tight on time. However, the writing cues here resonate long after the narrative ends.’



Rock, Paper, Scissors
Postgraduate Craft Skills – Sound



Beyond the Bay Postgraduate Saving the Planet;
Postgraduate Craft Skills – Camerawork



Adiós
Postgraduate Craft Skills –
Production Design

The RTS Student Television Awards 2025 reward outstanding work produced during the 2023/24 academic year. Undergraduate entries were first judged at a regional level by their local RTS centre in early 2025. The winning films from each RTS centre, along with all postgraduate entries, were then judged nationally in April 2025. The Craft Skills awards were made at the discretion of the judges.



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In 1985, a small group of “anxious and scared” gay students walked quickly through Cardiff city centre on the first Pride march in Wales. Four decades on, a handful of them were reunited at an RTS Cymru Wales event to watch a documentary about the milestone, recall what life was like back then and chart the progress made since.

The film *Proud* was screened at primetime on ITV Cymru Wales and on ITVX just days before Pride Cymru 2025, a joyous and colourful celebration for more than 50,000 people. It was very different for the few dozen on that first Pride march.

One marcher, Francis Brown, remembered: “It was very difficult to be an out gay person in the 1980s. Those of us on the university’s Gay Society march were anxious and scared, so we walked quite quickly. We had chants like ‘2-4-6-8, is that copper



Cardiff Pride in 1985

ITV

Scared... but full of pride

RTS Cymru Wales Forty years after the first Pride march in Wales, an ITV film looks back at that historic day. **Roz Laws** reports



ITV

really straight?’. We were met by some slightly stunned shoppers but now there are thousands cheering on Pride.”

It may feel like society has progressed, but the RTS audience heard that the fight continues to defend minorities and especially trans rights. One of the panel speakers, also featuring in the film, was Owen Hurcum, who, at just 23, was elected Mayor of Bangor in 2021. Hurcum expressed dismay

at the recent Supreme Court ruling that the definition of “sex” in the 2010 Equality Act refers to a person’s sex at birth: “Pride is a celebration and also a protest, which is sometimes forgotten. What’s the point of doing it if we’re dancing alongside the people who are oppressing us?”

“We filmed the documentary in February, since when the situation for LGBTQ+ people in the UK has got so much worse. Our rights in general are sliding backwards and trans rights are being eroded at an alarming rate. That’s why it’s so important to have our voices heard in documentaries like *Proud*.”

Proud’s producer/director, Nicola Hendy, added: “Some might say, ‘I don’t know what the problem is now’. But in the last week of editing the film, in March, Hungary

banned Pride marches. That brought home to me the reason I’m doing this: somewhere, not far away, the right to march for people like me is being taken away.”

The documentary also features Rob Keetch, a youth worker and drag queen called Dr Bev, who told the RTS: “What stuck out for me from *Proud* is that it has been 40 years but the battle cry is still the same. Equality is one thing but equity is another. We’re now sitting at the table, but we don’t have the same menu.

“Our voices are still very quiet compared with the non-LGBTQ+ community. When they give us their platform in films like this, that means the world. It makes a massive difference when they carry our flag with us.

“The allyship has to be

meant and not just be a box-ticking exercise,” added Keetch, mentioning the community’s delight – then disappointment – at the introduction in 2021 of a trans non-binary character (paramedic Sah Brockner) in the Cardiff-based BBC One drama *Casualty*.

“They were brought in – and then, just as they were about to have top surgery, they were dropped and never referenced again. That’s not allyship.”

The RTS event was followed by a disco at Porter’s, formerly Exit, one of Cardiff’s oldest gay bars. ■

The Proud screening and Q&A, a joint event between RTS Cymru Wales and ITV Cymru Wales, was held at Porter’s in Cardiff on 16 June. It was hosted by ITV presenter Carl Edwards.

Some animals are born for the lime-light; lions, tigers and elephants frequently grace our screens, but there are plenty more weird and wonderful animals waiting for their shot at stardom.

Underdogs brings these lesser-known creatures to the forefront, in a new comedy/wildlife series narrated by Ryan Reynolds.

The first episode of the five-part National Geographic series was screened at the Watershed, Bristol, to an RTS audience last month, followed by a Q&A with key production talent from programme-makers Wildstar Films. As executive producer Dan Rees explained, the series was a leap for National Geographic: "It's a new format at a premium price point. It was a big risk to do the first ever comedy/natural history genre mash-up like this."

Fortunately for the team, they had early involvement from Ryan Reynolds – star of *Deadpool* and, of course, co-owner of Wrexham football club – and his production company Maximum Effort.

"We were super-grateful to [Maximum Effort] for taking the risk and supporting us," said Rees. "Having [Reynolds'] involvement all the way through informed our story choices and story development."

Rees explained that the theme of "rooting for the underdog" intersected perfectly with Maximum Effort's brand identity.

"Underdog stories are universal," added writer Polly Billam. "There's a reason people like an underdog story: it makes us feel good to see the little guy socking it to the big guy."

The selection process for the underdogs in the show was rigorous, as Rees explained: "We were quite strict with ourselves... they had to be underdogs, they



Manatees in *Underdogs*:
'It makes us feel good to see the little guy socking it to the big guy'

National Geographic

Ready for our close-up

West of England Ryan Reynolds brings Hollywood glamour to Nat Geo's new wildlife series. **Seraphina Allard-Bridge** reports

had to be either gross, weird, downtrodden or vilified... and they had to be doing something amazing."

The challenge was then to film the animals and tell their stories in the right way. Gary Smith, producer/director, explained: "Filming animals that a lot of people don't film – there's a reason they don't film them... because they're really, really hard to film."

Story development, therefore, proved difficult – but also rewarding. "What's great about the project is that all restriction is off," said Smith. "You can use complete freedom artistically to make stories work."

"There are a lot of things in there that I'm really surprised stayed in," Smith added. The first episode features such playful sequences as a week

in the life of a honey badger, and images of frogs mating, appearing on screen as Polaroids.

The team shot 1,100 hours of footage, which had to be cut down to five 40-minute episodes that balanced comedic timing with amazing animal behaviour. Executive editor Nigel Buck stepped out of his comfort zone for the project: "When you're cutting natural history, the problem scenes are always the comedy scenes. There's normally one or two in a film. This is all comedy."

Bringing the show together is the voice of Reynolds, and Billam was tasked with writing a commentary that matched his persona.

"I watched days and days of Ryan footage," she recalled. "It's a bit like learning a foreign language; you

have to immerse yourself in that language before you try to speak it."

Billam also found it was important to take a step back from the edit in order to see the footage with fresh eyes: "A lot of great material came from people's first reactions to those early cuts because that's kind of how Ryan's humour works; at times, it's almost like he has been taken by surprise."

The resulting National Geographic series is hilarious and Rees hopes it will have wide appeal: "If we can bring a new audience to the genre, that would be great for all of us." ■

The RTS West of England premiere and Q&A was hosted by Ashwika Kapur and produced by Suzy Lambert. *Underdogs* is on Disney+.

Rebus, the gritty BBC crime drama based on Ian Rankin's acclaimed novels, took home a hat-trick of awards from the RTS Scotland Awards in June.

The series, made by Eleventh Hour Films and starring Richard Rankin as the troubled detective John Rebus, scored wins in the Drama, Writer (Gregory Burke) and Director: Scripted (Niall MacCormick) categories.

My Epic Camel Adventure with Gordon Buchanan also picked up three awards at the ceremony in the craft categories. Jack Warrender, Jim Incledon and Gordon Buchanan won the Camera award, while Jack Creith and Tom Forbes triumphed in Sound and Simon Hamilton in Post-production: Editing.

In the BBC Scotland series, made by Glasgow-based Hello Halo Productions, Buchanan takes an epic camel ride across the Gobi desert to discover how the animals have adapted to survive in such extreme environments.

The acting gongs went to Peter Capaldi for his performance in the Apple TV+ London crime thriller *Criminal Record* and to Ashley Jensen, DI Ruth Calder in BBC One's long-running crime drama *Shetland*.

Glasgow-set BBC Three comedy-drama *Dinosaur*, starring Ashley Storrie as Nina, a palaeontologist with autism,



Rebus bagged a hat-trick of awards at the Glasgow ceremony

BBC

Rebus reaps rewards

RTS Scotland Glasgow's Old Fruitmarket hosted an all-star ceremony celebrating Scottish TV talent. **Matthew Bell** reports

won the Comedy award. Scottish broadcast journalist and former STV Political Editor Bernard Ponsonby received an award for Outstanding Achievement. Ponsonby joined STV in 1990 and retired from the broadcaster earlier this year.

Margaret Cameron, Director of Content at Gaelic media service MG ALBA, was honoured with a Special Recognition award.

Composer James Gray

was the first winner of the Original Music Score award for his work on Channel 4's *All Aboard! Scotland's Poshest Train*, in which actor Alan Cumming revels in the splendour of the Royal Scotsman on a journey through the heart of Scotland.

TV presenter Shereen Cutkelvin and actor/writer Sanjeev Kohli handed out 27 awards at the Old Fruitmarket in Glasgow while STV news reporter Laura Boyd

carried out interviews with winners behind the scenes.

New Chair of RTS Scotland Dan Twist said: "This year's outstanding nominees and winners reflect the strength and resilience of a thriving Scottish TV industry, even in the face of widespread sector challenges. RTS Scotland is proud to continue its unwavering commitment to supporting, educating and championing talent across all areas of the industry." ■

RTS Scotland Television Awards winners

Outstanding Achievement - Bernard Ponsonby

Special Recognition - Margaret Cameron

Drama - *Rebus* - Eleventh Hour Films for BBC Scotland and BBC One

Actor - Male - Peter Capaldi, *Criminal Record* - Tod Productions and STV Studios for Apple TV+

Actor - Female - Ashley Jensen, *Shetland* - Silverprint Pictures for BBC One

Director - Non-scripted - Colin Murray, *The Kingdom: The World's Most Powerful Prince* - Rogan Productions for BBC Two

Director - Scripted - Niall MacCormick,

Rebus - Eleventh Hour Films for BBC Scotland and BBC One

Writer - Gregory Burke, *Rebus* - Eleventh Hour Films for BBC Scotland and BBC One

On-screen Personality - Michelle McManus

Comedy - *Dinosaur* - Two Brothers Pictures for BBC Scotland, BBC Three and Hulu

Entertainment - Rikki - Hopscotch Films for BBC Scotland

Documentary - Janey - Hopscotch Films for BBC Scotland

Specialist Factual - In My Own Words: Jackie Kay - BBC Studios for BBC One

News - Sky News (Scotland Bureau) - Sky

Young Journalist - Selena Jackson - STV

Current Affairs - Disclosure: Catching a Killer: The Murder of Emma Caldwell -

BBC Scotland News/Disclosure for BBC Scotland

Live Event - Up Late with Nicola Benedetti - IWC Media for Sky Arts

Daytime and features - Scam Interceptors - BBC Studios for BBC One

Children's - The Primrose Railway Children - BBC Studios Kids & Family for BBC One

Sport - Celtic 3-2 St Mirren - Celtic's Trophy Day - Sky Sports Scotland for Sky Sports

Short Form - Synthetic Pleasures - Revenant and Stuart Langfield for OFFF Barcelona

Camera - Jack Warrender, Jim Incledon and Gordon Buchanan, *My Epic Camel Adventure with Gordon Buchanan* - Hello Halo Productions

for BBC Scotland and BBC Two

Original Music Score - James Gray, *All Aboard! Scotland's Poshest Train* - 14th Floor Productions for Channel 4

Post-production - Editing - Simon Hamilton for *My Epic Camel Adventure with Gordon Buchanan* - Hello Halo Productions for BBC Scotland and BBC Two

Post-production - Motion Design and Animation - Synthetic Pleasures - Revenant and Stuart Langfield for OFFF Barcelona

Sound - Jack Creith and Tom Forbes for *My Epic Camel Adventure with Gordon Buchanan* - Serious Facilities, Hello Halo for BBC Scotland and BBC Two

Student Award - On the Red List - Mathilde van Ooijen, Andrea Costa, Carla Basu and Sean Burns, University of the West of Scotland



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www.rts.org.uk

Scripting a soap like ITV's *Coronation Street* is a gargantuan task. The writers pen 300-plus episodes a year, involving a cast of 80, to keep viewers engaged and entertained week after week.

How they do it was the subject of an RTS Futures online event that brought together a *Corrie* script editor and three writers, each trying to write a line as good as this one from brassy barmaid Bet Lynch, picked by Joe Parkinson as his favourite from the show: "You see this smile, Betty, it's not really a smile – it's the lid on a scream."

Parkinson is a former story producer and editor of more than 1,700 episodes and now writes for the ITV soap. He explained that what viewers will see is planned at story conferences – essentially, a writers room – held every four weeks and involving creative execs, storyliners, writers and script editors: "[People are] encouraged to pitch ideas for stories to play out across four weeks."

"Every 12 weeks, there is a long-term [conference for] stories from six months to a year or two years – those big, long-running stories like Paul's motor neurone disease.



Corrie romance: Danielle (Natalie Anderson) and Jason (Ryan Thomas)

ITV

How the Rovers returns

RTS Futures After 65 years, *Coronation Street* still comes up with compelling stories. **Matthew Bell** discovers its secrets

Putting pen to paper

Debbie Oates 'Prioritise writing, make time for it. You've got to finish things [so] you can send them, get advice, develop and move on. Also, you need to have a spec script that shows your range. Otherwise, nobody knows what you can do.'

'Don't wait for confidence, because it may never show up. You meet a lot of writers who are too shy to show stuff – you've just got to do it and take the pain when people say it's rubbish.'

Joe Parkinson 'Maybe this is the sort of school I went to, but you were pushed into doing certain things for a living. You'd have felt ridiculous to say, "I'd like to be a writer". It can seem unattainable, but it isn't. But you do need to put the work in. As Debbie says, just write.'

Alison Hunt 'If you're being rejected or it feels hopeless, don't think that anyone has had an easy journey into this job. They haven't.'

first conference: "It was frightening and intimidating, coming in and scrabbling for a seat next to a familiar face. But each time you go to a conference, you [feel] encouraged to speak more and more.... [Now] it's a pleasurable experience."

Debbie Oates, who has written almost 300 episodes over 20 years, said that ideas "come from character. Every story has been told, but it has never been told with that character or that family or that combination of characters."

She added that stories about "debt, grief, illness or conflict" might be "universal but they're always individual, and that's why you never get bored of them".

"Ideas are everywhere; the challenge is making ideas work on screen. The papers are full of ideas, conversations are full of ideas, your friends and family are full of ideas. But it's about

emotional impact – why will an audience be interested in this character going through a particular event?"

Oates described her writing process as like a potter, throwing around a load of clay and then moulding it into a finished article. "I write the whole thing from beginning to end, then I type that in, and that's called my crap draft. My partner is under instructions that, if I die, anything called 'crap draft' will get deleted," she said.

By the time script editor Alison Hunt reads Oates' first draft of an episode, she says there's "very little work that needs doing because she is so meticulous. It is so cleverly crafted". ■

The online RTS Futures event, 'Deep dive: writing for soap', was held on 16 June and hosted and produced by Patrick Talbot, a series producer at Lifted Entertainment.

RTS Scotland You've got the experience and the skills, but one thing is missing – the CV, a necessity in the TV industry. Unfortunately, CVs can look clunky, unorganised and ugly.

In response, RTS Scotland hosted a recent online event, "Student CV and networking masterclass", to improve the quality of your résumé and boost the chances of it falling into the right hands and getting noticed.

The event was hosted by BBC Studios Talent Executive Jane McLaughlin and Jeannot Hutcheson, HR and Talent Executive at Glasgow-based Raise the Roof Productions.

McLaughlin admitted that the majority of CVs were skimmed through but said a good CV "should get you the interview".

Photos in CVs were off-putting, she continued. "Attitude is the one thing that makes you stand out." Companies were always attracted to "avid consumers of all



Escape to the Farm with Kate Humble, made by Glasgow's Raise the Roof Productions

Channel 5

love for TV", said McLaughlin, stressing that this should always "be written in the first person". Hutcheson recommended "knowing what is going out and watching it", adding that it was vital "you understand why you like watching it". McLaughlin concluded: "Don't be afraid to show passion."

"There are no right or wrong answers," said Hutcheson.

■ In June, RTS Scotland ran a sold-out event at BBC Scotland, "The student connection". This gave recent graduates of TV courses at Scotland's universities and colleges the chance to meet representatives from local production, post-production and facilities companies.

Students also attended a panel discussion with leading industry figures and tried out equipment, including a camera provided by equipment suppliers CVP.

Josh McGrohon

Make your CV the cream of the crop

kinds of content". Including a cover letter was stressed by Hutcheson, who encouraged applicants to "attach CVs as

PDF documents" as it looked "more professional".

In the cover letter, you should "demonstrate your



Happy birthday dear Guvna...

Let's hear it for Guvna B, author, rapper and broadcaster, who presented the RTS Student Television Awards in his heartwarming style for the second year running. His charm brought a special energy to the room.

Last month's awards happened to coincide with the Guvna's birthday. Luckily, the MC for the afternoon – RTS Honorary Secretary Simon Bucks – had "a ready-made 400-strong choir" to hand. As the presentations ended, Simon led the audience in a rendition

of *Happy Birthday to You*. Celebrations all round, then.

A double dose of triple winners

A big winner at the Student Awards was *milk*, a cathartic documentary, billed as "an intimate exploration of maternity and loss", and described by the jury as "close to perfection". *milk* was a three-times winner in the postgraduate section, triumphing in Factual - Long Form and also in the Craft Skills Editing and Writing categories.

Another triple winner was *Anomaly* – Artūrs Vobļikovs' stop-frame animation, winner in Undergraduate Animation and Undergraduate Craft Skills, Writing and Production Design. Accepting his awards, Artūrs reminded

the audience of what a great year it had been for Latvian animation, after *Flow* became the first fully European-produced film to win an Oscar for Best Animation Feature.

Gulp! That was a moving moment

Awards ceremonies tend to generate a fair amount of emotion. This year's RTS Student Television Awards kept that tradition alive. One lovely moment came when mature student Philip Denvir won for *Leave Only Footprints* in the Postgraduate Factual – Short Form category. Recalling how he had transformed his life to return to college and fulfil a lifetime ambition, the film-maker thanked his wife for supporting his dream. "It's great to see how much these awards

mean to people," observed Guvna B. Absolutely.

It's truly an honour

The Upside was delighted to see Stephen Lambert, Jeff Pope, Dana Strong, Jane Tranter and this month's TV Diarist, John Whiston, included in the King's Birthday Honours last month.

Stephen, the high priest of formatted TV, was awarded an OBE, as was John. Jane becomes a CBE in recognition of her work in drama, having helped mastermind shows such as *Doctor Who*, *His Dark Materials* and *A Discovery of Witches* at Cardiff production powerhouse Bad Wolf. Jeff, a prolific screenwriter and producer, received an MBE for services to drama, while Sky Group Chief Executive Dana Strong was awarded a CBE. ■



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Who's who at the RTS	<p>Patron His Majesty King Charles III</p> <p>Vice-Presidents David Abraham Dawn Airey Sir David Attenborough OM CH CVO CBE FRS Baroness Floella Benjamin OBE Mike Darcey Gary Davey Greg Dyke Lord Hall of Birkenhead Lorraine Heggessey Armando Iannucci OBE Ian Jones Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon OBE David Lynn Ken MacQuarrie Sir Trevor McDonald OBE Gavin Patterson Sir Trevor Phillips OBE Stewart Purvis CBE Brandon Riegg Sir Howard Stringer</p>	<p>Chair of RTS Trustees Jane Turton</p> <p>Honorary Secretary Simon Bucks</p> <p>Honorary Treasurer Mike Green</p> <p>BOARD OF TRUSTEES Lynn Barlow Julian Bellamy Simon Bucks Mike Green Tim Hincks Kate Phillips Simon Pitts Sinéad Rocks Sarah Rose Jane Turton</p> <p>EXECUTIVE Chief Executive Theresa Wise</p>	<p>CENTRES COUNCIL Phil Barnes Agnes Cogan Michael Donnelly Rachel Drummond-Hay Matt Geraghty Kully Khaila Dinah Lord Sarah McCaffrey Joanna Makepeace-Woods Stuart Ray Cameron Roach Kim Rowell Edward Russell Dan Twist</p> <p>SPECIALIST GROUP CHAIRS National Events Sarah Booth</p> <p>Education Graeme Thompson</p> <p>RTS Futures Kat Hebden</p>	<p>RTS Digital Innovation Bursary Simon Pitts</p> <p>Chair IDEA Committee Joanna Abeyie</p> <p>AWARDS CHAIRS Awards Policy Simon Bucks</p> <p>Craft & Design Awards Emma Gormley</p> <p>Programme Awards Kenton Allen</p> <p>Student Television Awards Sinéad Rocks</p> <p>Television Journalism Awards Adrian Wells</p> <p>Young Technologist Award Terry Marsh</p> <p>Shiers Trust Award Simon Clark</p>

RTS CAMBRIDGE CONVENTION - 17-18 SEPTEMBER 2025

Chaired by:

TIM DAVIE CBE

Director-General, BBC



JONATHAN ALLAN

Interim CEO, Channel 4

ED BALLS

Co-Host, Political Currency

MARK BURNETT

Hollywood Producer and
US Special Envoy to the UK

SIR NICK CLEGG

Former President of
Global Affairs, Meta

JOHN LANDGRAF

Chairman, FX

DAME CAROLYN McCALL

CEO, ITV

GEORGE OSBORNE

Co-Host, Political Currency

SARAH ROSE

President, Channel 5 and UK
Regional Lead, Paramount Global

DANA STRONG CBE

CEO, Sky Group

BARONESS SHRITI VADERA

Chair, Creative Industries Council

ANTHONY WOOD

Founder & CEO, Roku

JEFF ZUCKER

CEO, Redbird IMI

A large, abstract graphic of several thick, curved tubes growing upwards from the bottom. The tubes are colored in a gradient from green at the base to blue at the top. They are arranged in a way that suggests growth and upward movement.

WHERE DO WE GROW FROM HERE?