

May 2025

Television



Silence is golden

Rose Ayling-Ellis and Andrew Buchan star in a pioneering ITV crime drama



ROYAL
TELEVISION
SOCIETY

RTS STUDENT TELEVISION AWARDS 2025

13 JUNE

**IET: SAVOY PLACE
LONDON WC2R 0BL**

BOOK YOUR PLACE AT:
RTS.ORG.UK

HOST: **GUVNA B**

#RTSawards



From the CEO



Code of Silence is a pioneering ITV police drama starring Rose Ayling-Ellis as a lip-reader who goes undercover to infiltrate a gang. Impressively, many of the production team come from a deaf, disabled or neurodiverse background. Do read Shilpa Ganatra's cover story.

Writers are the backbone of TV drama. Inside, we feature two of the UK's best screenwriters: Jack Thorne, creator of *Adolescence*, profiled by Simon Bucks; and Peter Straughan, of *Wolf Hall* fame, interviewed by Graeme Thompson.

For decades, there has been something special about Saturday night TV,

whether it's Bruce Forsyth hosting *The Generation Game*, Cilla Black playing Cupid in *Blind Date* or Ant & Dec on *Saturday Night Takeaway*. Mark Lawson recalls these and other shiny-floor shows in a fascinating account of the history of Saturday night telly.

Talking of weekend TV, don't miss Simon Shaps' review of a new biography of *Saturday Night Live* creator Lorne Michaels. He will be at the helm when a UK version of the show makes its debut on Sky next year.

Outside London, the RTS Nations and Regions continue to set an ambitious agenda of events. The hilarious Joe Lycett was centre-stage at an RTS Midlands evening where he spoke engagingly of why he wanted to make his US road trip, *The United States of Birmingham*. Do read our report.

I am seriously enjoying series

seven of *Black Mirror* on Netflix. Creator Charlie Brooker is at the top of his game as he weaves compelling storylines and characters from the fertile terrain of tech dystopia. Caitlin Danaher met him and delivers a must-read piece.

As the screen sector continues to navigate difficult times, training, career development and ensuring that those who work in TV possess the right skills to meet the challenges of the future have never been more important. Steve Clarke interviews ScreenSkills chief executive Laura Mansfield, who explains why she remains optimistic about the future of our industry.

Theresa

Theresa Wise

Contents

Cover: ITV

- 5 Lisa Opie's TV diary**
The former BBC Studios chief on what she has learnt after switching to the video games industry
- 6 Comfort classic: Kath & Kim**
James Bennett raises a glass of 'Cardonnay' to a feted Aussie sitcom that delights in wordplay
- 7 Ear candy: Critics at Large**
A trio of *New Yorker* critics move the cultural conversation from print to audio. Harrison Bennett tunes in
- 8 Working lives: indie boss**
Tom Miller tells Matthew Bell how the 'mindblowing' *A Thousand Blows* was brought to our screens
- 10 Our friend in the East**
Dinah Lord says she can barely move for high-end TV and film shoots in her thriving region
- 11 Saturday night fever**
From Bruce and Cilla to Ant & Dec, Mark Lawson traces the evolution of primetime weekend telly
- 14 Survival of the funniest**
As *Saturday Night Live* creates a UK version, Simon Shaps reviews a biography of its creator, Lorne Michaels
- 16 Sign of the times**
Shilpa Ganatra meets actor Rose Ayling-Ellis and the production team behind new ITV drama *Code of Silence*
- 18 The black of beyond**
Black Mirror creator Charlie Brooker talks tech with Caitlin Danaher as the show returns for series seven
- 20 TV's engine has stalled...**
Carole Solazzo goes in search of jump leads as the industry endures a jobs crisis across the nation
- 22 Voice of the zeitgeist**
Simon Bucks celebrates Jack Thorne, the writer whose visceral drama *Adolescence* sparked a national debate
- 24 Master of the quill**
Oscar-winning screenwriter Peter Straughan, adapter of *Wolf Hall* and *Conclave*, talks to Graeme Thompson
- 26 First lesson? The glass is half full...**
ScreenSkills CEO Laura Mansfield is upbeat about the future. Steve Clarke meets the 'yes, can do' leader
- 28 Bang the drum for Brum**
Joe Lycett extols his hometown, Birmingham, at the RTS Midlands premiere of his Sky documentary
- 30 RTS news and events**
Reports of the Society's screenings, awards and events from around the UK and Ireland

Editor
Steve Clarke
smclarke_333@hotmail.com

Deputy editor
Matthew Bell
bell127@btinternet.com

Production, design, advertising
Vernon Adams,
James Bennett

Sub-editor
Sarah Bancroft

RTS, 3 Dorset Rise
London EC4Y 8EN
T: 020 7822 2810
W: www.rts.org.uk

© Royal Television Society 2025
The views expressed in *Television*
are not necessarily those of the RTS.
Registered Charity 313 728



Join the ROYAL TELEVISION SOCIETY and play your part.

As a member of the Royal Television Society you become part of an exciting and creative community, who share a common passion for the art and science of television. Membership opens up a world of networking, educational, and professional opportunities, as well as contributing towards bursaries and educational events for young people that want to study TV related subjects.

Membership
from just

£75

per year

Our members can also enjoy:

- **Networking events**
- **Lectures, masterclasses and workshops**
- **Annual awards ceremonies**
- **Early access to the RTS magazine Television**
- **Access to private members' clubs in London and Bristol**
- **Impressive discounts for shopping, restaurants, hotels & business services**

To join and for full details of all member benefits, visit our website

www.rts.org.uk

TV diary



After working in TV for more decades than I care to remember, it's interesting to compare my working day at Ubisoft with my old life. Today, I'm in Newcastle, a city I love and home to Ubisoft Reflections, the oldest games studio in the UK.

People working in TV may not know (I know I didn't) that the UK is the second-largest video games market in Europe and the sixth largest in the world. We have a history of IP creation and innovation, from iconic titles like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Tomb Raider*, to Reflection's *Driver* series, and our studio's work in recent years on *Assassin's Creed Nexus* and *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora*.

■ **We work in collaboration with Ubisoft's 40-plus studios around the world, so a lot of my time is spent ensuring the strength of those partnerships. Our team is diverse – more than 20 nationalities – and highly skilled. We employ audio experts, artists, animators, programmers and producers.**

Some of our people have worked across the screen sector, and all are passionate about making video games – a complex, iterative and highly creative task.

■ There's an impressive video games workforce in the UK – 70,000 people work directly or in the supply chain to support around 2,000 games studios. But skills are a challenge.

Technology and the emergence of generative AI are set to drive exponential change in how games are

The games industry has a skilled and diverse workforce around the world. What it needs now, writes Lisa Opie, is more women

made and the skills we will need. Upskilling intermediate employees is a challenge, and a lack of alignment in career paths and roles across the sector makes it even harder. As Chair of ScreenSkills, I'm particularly keen to ensure we have a talent pipeline fit for the future.

■ **In the morning, I meet with UKIE (the Association for UK Interactive Entertainment) to talk about how we can bring the industry together. Greater alignment of career paths will have the added benefit of making our industry more accessible. Just over 24% of the European games workforce are female. It's one of my priorities to increase that percentage and support those at more senior levels of their careers.**

If we're to better reflect our players, we need to be better at showing the many opportunities and pathways in this industry.

■ Later in the day, I have a meeting to prepare a pitch for a new mandate. Our brand director talks through online player interactions and creating new and exciting experiences.

We discuss the relative merits of a Games as a Platform (GAAP) business model, where the core gameplay loop needs to be compelling enough in itself to immerse and engage players.

As you can tell, I have had to learn a new language in moving to this industry and I still get a huge kick out of that.

■ **Video games can be made remotely and, during Covid, were still successfully delivered. But coming together in person undoubtedly helps teams to collectively learn from each other in a way that's harder when you are miles apart.**

We want our remote teams to feel connected too – with dedicated comms channels, social events and visits up north.

■ On the train home, I read a review of the new TV series of *The Last of Us*. *The Last of Us 2* was just one of the many games I played before joining the industry. I was blown away by the narrative, the world and my agency within it.

The TV adaptation is probably the best of its kind. For me, it illustrates the huge opportunity for greater collaboration across the screen sectors. I can't wait to see what's next in this fast-moving and always exciting industry.

Lisa Opie is Managing Director of Ubisoft Reflections.

COMFORT CLASSIC



Kath & Kim

Gina Riley as 'hornbag' Kim with Jane Turner as 'foxy lady' Kath

Mother-daughter relations reach new depths in this feted Australian sitcom. **James Bennett** raises a glass of Cardonnay

Do you speak *Kath & Kim*? Yes, it's an Aussie sitcom, but it's also a language. If you're fluent, you will call your lounge the "good room", declare after a slap-up meal that you're "full up to pussy's bow" and wash that meal down with a glass of Cardonnay (insisting that the "h" is silent).

Once hooked, you may find yourself employing *Kath & Kim* vocabulary for life – and hoping that the life in question turns out to be "effluent".

First aired in 2002, *Kath & Kim* became one of Australia's highest-rated series, and reached the UK in 2005 via BBC Two, picking up an ever-growing cult audience. If you knew, you knew.

Set in the fictional Melbourne suburb of Fountain Lakes, it stars the show's co-creator Jane Turner as Kath Day, a "foxy lady" with the frizziest of perms (her "clowning glory") and disastrous taste in chunky knits and leisurewear. She shares that taste with Kel Knight (Glenn Robbins), purveyor of fine meats, to whom she is soon wed, becoming Kath Day-Knight in the process.

The sole barrier to marital bliss is Kath's grown-up daughter, Kim (the other co-creator, Gina Riley), probably the most self-centred character ever to grace a TV screen. Kim is a self-proclaimed "hornbag" whose trademark is a muffin top partnered with

visible G-string. When not engaged in flicking her hair or squirting canned cream directly into her potty mouth, Kimmy is found yelling at her downtrodden on-off husband, Brett (Peter Rowsthorn), and her "second best friend", Sharon (Magda Szubanski), a short, wide tomboy with pudding-bowl haircut who excels at all sports but is never free of lumps, bumps and carbuncles.

Put that cast together and you get 32 side-splitting episodes over four series, including what some see as the funniest ever TV wedding: Kath, the bride, breaks most of her bones and Kim is felled by the amorous advances of the feisty horse that pulls the pumpkin wedding carriage.

As the show grew in popularity, celebrities clamoured to be guest stars, with a roll call of Aussie royalty (Barry Humphries, Kylie Minogue, Shane

Warne, Eric Bana, Rachel Griffiths) joined by Matt Lucas and Richard E Grant from these shores. Canada's Michael Bubl  also signed up, describing his screen flirtation with Kath – and corresponding argy-bargy with a jealous Kel – as a career highlight.

What really set *Kath & Kim* apart, though, was the way it revelled in wordplay; even the title is a play on "kith and kin". A typical gag has Kath bustling round her kitchen while discussing her wedding plans. She insists she "can't elope" just as we see her open the fridge door and bring out a... cantaloupe. Then there's the episode where Kath instructs Kim to order a statue of "little baby Jesus" as a party centrepiece. What turns up is an abomination of shiny red globes on cocktail sticks – little baby cheeses!

Barry Humphries said of the show: "It gives the impression of being improvised but in fact it's very finely crafted." And former Australian PM Julia Gillard was also a fan, citing Kath as an inspiration.

Though the show finished in 2012, it never seems to have left our screens.

**KATH TELLS KIM
TO GET A LITTLE
BABY JESUS.
WHAT TURNS UP
IS LITTLE BABY
CHEESES**

It's now on Netflix, but the prospect of more *Kath & Kim* seems slim, especially since the Melbourne house it was filmed in was demolished in 2022.

So we may never again hear Kath announce: "I've got one word to say to you..." before blurting out several. Never see Kel inventing his latest commemorative sausage. Never witness Kim getting "literally legless".

Yet *Kath & Kim*, with its mile-a-minute wordplay, is made for repeat viewing (this writer is a fourth-timer). It's very much love it or hate it, and some people just don't get it. But if you've never seen it and you are susceptible, you're in for a treat.

Forget the oft-cited idea that we're laughing *with* the characters. We laugh *at* Kath, Kim, Kel, Sharon and Brett. And they're hilarious. ■

Kath & Kim is available on Netflix.

Ear candy

The New Yorker: Critics at Large

In his recent book, *Filterworld*, Kyle Chayka makes a passionate case for human curation as a remedy for an era of "culture-flattening" recommendation algorithms.

As traditional media grapples with this digital age and professional criticism loses its prominence, new forms of curation arise. Three colleagues of Chayka's at *The New Yorker*, Vinson Cunningham, Naomi Fry and Alexandra Schwartz, have adapted by adding a weekly podcast to their beats. *Critics at Large* is much more digestible but offers no less brainfood than the dense intellectual workout of the magazine (I can't be the only poser who got more use from the free tote bag that comes with a subscription).

Though double acts dominate the podcast form, in this case three is not a crowd. Cunningham, Fry and Schwartz are a warm and erudite trio as they translate the highbrow criticism they write for the magazine into the chit-chat of this medium. It's like being invited to a convivial literary dinner party once a week where the hosts "make sense of what's happening in the culture right now, and how we got here".

The trio pick a current cultural obsession to analyse from a unique perspective by drawing from their deep wells of eclectic knowledge. Much has been made, for example, of Apple TV+'s workplace satire and dystopian thriller *Severance* – but I hadn't heard anyone use it as a jumping-off point to trace the artistic trope of the "double" across centuries of art and ideas.

Starting from its emergence in 19th-century Gothic literature, Schwartz offers a convincing psychoanalytic

reading of *Severance* using Freud's notions of the "doppelganger" and repression. Then, via a Gwyneth Paltrow romcom, we move right up to the modern horrors of our own "social media avatars" – self-optimisation and AI. "Every era gets the 'double' it deserves," concludes Schwartz.

The team are particularly good at analysing the macro trends that emerge across the culture. In *Joe Rogan, Hasan Piker and the Art of the Hang*, they delve into new media such as Rogan's podcast and Piker's political Twitch stream. In what has become a regular bonus, they are joined by another staff

writer who specialises in the subject. In this case it's Andrew Marantz, who recently profiled Piker for the magazine.

He is fascinating on how this new media has enshrined in our politics the ability to "hang out in an unscripted way";

Trump's election victory has been partially credited to his embrace of such podcasts.

In a recent taping of a live show celebrating *The New Yorker's* centenary, the hosts discussed reviews from the archives that have aged badly. Among them was Terrence Rafferty's take-down of *When Harry Met Sally...*, now widely seen as one of the greatest ever romcoms. "It made the movie come alive for me again to have to dispute it with the critic," said Schwartz."

These three critics at large are so well informed and their arguments so well reasoned that it would be hard for any of us relative philistines to "dispute" them. And I can guarantee that they will breathe more life into the culture around you than a doomscroll through your "For You page". ■

Harrison Bennett



WORKING LIVES



Indie boss

'Mindblowing':
Stephen Graham and
Daniel Mays in
A Thousand Blows

Robert Viglasky

Tom Miller is on a roll: the success of sporting underdog film *The Phantom of the Open* has been followed by five-star reviews for Disney+ bare-knuckle boxing drama *A Thousand Blows*. This summer, Water & Power Productions comedy series *Mr Bigstuff* returns to Sky. And *The Scurry*, a comedy-horror featuring killer squirrels, is in cinemas next year.

What does the job involve?

Making TV and film. We have a small team to originate and develop projects, then we build relationships and work with writers, talent, broadcasters and film financiers to get them made.

How many projects do you have on the go?

Around 30 or so at any one time, across comedy, drama and film. Development can be a thankless process, but if it's an idea you believe in, sometimes you just keep going – *The Phantom of the Open* took 14 years to bring to the screen.

How do you come up with ideas?

When we started, we didn't have a

reputation or many contacts, so the ideas came from us. That could be true stories, like *The Phantom of the Open* [with writer Simon Farnaby], or from our own imaginations, like the Sky comedy-drama *Code 404* and *A Thousand Blows*.

The latter idea came from a Water & Power researcher, Verity Simpson, who showed us a picture of the bare-knuckle boxer Hezekiah Moscow, and everything flowed from that. We're currently developing a TV drama with Suranne Jones and Laurence Akers about witchcraft, which was originated by our development producer, Lauren Yeates.

Increasingly, as we build a reputation, we get sent books and scripts, though developing them can be expensive. We don't have backers – we're completely independent – so we have to bear development costs.

Is being independent a good thing?

Good ... and bad: we have freedom and can follow our own passions. The negative is that we're completely on our own financially.

Did you always want to work in TV?

I was a film and TV addict in my teens. After studying history at university, I took a film course at the New York Film Academy, then worked on the academy's summer school in London. Then I got a job as a runner at the post-production house Editworks, but soon realised I didn't want to be an editor.

What was your first proper job in the industry?

Editworks worked on Channel 4's *So Graham Norton*, and I got work experience on that. I was taken on as a runner, moved up to researcher and then assistant producer. It was exciting but it wasn't why I got into TV – I wanted to make scripted comedy and drama, so I had to move away from non-scripted into scripted TV.

You made your way in comedy...

I'd had a dream of working on a sketch show, a sitcom, a drama and a film, which I've managed to do. I produced an anarchic sketch show for CBBC called *Sorry, I've Got No Head* with Mel Giedroyc and Marcus Brigstocke,

which was a great way to learn about making scripted TV. There were so many costumes and sets, and budgets were tight. I then went on to produce *Horrible Histories* and the Channel 4 sitcoms *Temp* and *Lee and Dean*.

Did you always want to run your own indie?

It was the only way I was going to be able to make the TV drama and films I wanted. Three of us set up Water & Power a decade ago. We're old friends: James Swarbrick is from a film finance background; I'm a traditional TV producer, used to working in a creative environment; and Sam Myer is somewhere in between – he came up with the ideas for *Code 404* and is the creative lead on our new film, *The Scurry*.

Has it been worth it?

Absolutely. We've worked with brilliant people, in front of and behind the cameras, over the last few years: Disney+'s *A Thousand Blows* with Stephen Graham and Steven Knight; *Code 404* with Stephen Graham, Danny Mays and Anna Maxwell Martin; Sky's *Mr Bigstuff* with Ryan Sampson and Danny Dyer; and *The Phantom of the Open* with Mark Rylance and Craig Roberts.



'Follow your gut feeling': Tom Miller

Eric Fredeen

What's the biggest difference between TV and film?

With independent film, producers' fees are not guaranteed and, whenever budgets are squeezed, it's always the producers who are expected to defer their fees. It's hard to earn a living out of film; they hardly ever go into profit. Making a film is a labour of love. Producers' fees are protected in TV.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

The best is when something pays off – *A Thousand Blows* started in a small room with a picture of a boxer, and then I found myself standing on a huge set with 500 people at the old Budweiser brewery in Mortlake. That was mindblowing.

The worst is the risk you have to take on to get things made and the stress that comes with it.

What qualities do you need to run an indie?

You need to be positive and follow your gut feeling. You also have to be flexible and open to new ideas.

What advice would you give to someone starting out in TV now?

Be really clear about what you want to do, stay focused on it and follow it through.

What are your career highlights?

I've got three. The first time I got a joke in Graham Norton's monologue at the start of his Channel 4 show: "The Queen attended the 50th anniversary of *The Mousetrap* last night and was presented with a model of a golden mousetrap – it's a good job she didn't go to *The Vagina Monologues!*" It got a laugh, believe it or not!

The second was going to the premiere of *The Phantom of the Open* at the London Film Festival. It was my first proper film and the most personal thing I've done. I responded to [wannabe golf pro] Maurice Flitcroft as a character because he reminded me of my grandad.

The third was walking on to the set of *A Thousand Blows* for the first time.

What show would you love to make?

I've always loved crime, so I'd like to come up with and make a brilliant new crime procedural. Shows like *Cracker* and *Inspector Morse* were fantastic and are why I'm doing what I am now. I also love an obscure book called *Q*, written by a group of Italian anarchist writers who took the name Luther Blissett after the football player – that would be my bucket list project. ■



'We've worked with brilliant people': Danny Dyer and Ryan Sampson in *Mr Bigstuff*

Sky

Tom Miller was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

OUR FRIEND IN THE EAST

In the summer of 2023, a small city of Winnebagos and cranes sprang up overnight, covering the fields where I live in rural north Hertfordshire. The roads were closed as A-listers were filmed driving up to the school featured in Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice*.

The location was a huge former boarding school that had gone out of business during the pandemic. And then, 48 hours later, Hollywood disappeared, leaving no trace.

I'm now struck by how much this is a reflection of the scope of film and TV production in the RTS East region. There's a great deal of activity, from big-budget finance to crowd-funded projects – although it's often quite difficult to find out exactly where the action is in this large region that stretches from Bedfordshire, through Cambridgeshire to the coasts of Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk.

There are two parts to the industry here – the wealthy, growing studio ecology in south Hertfordshire and another, not so well-off, community of hugely talented creatives and production companies.

Understanding the level and range of activity and identifying and supporting the talent within the region has been a priority of RTS East over the past few years.

Certainly, the outlook for the major studios is rosy. Here's a striking fact: *Wicked* was the biggest box-office film in the UK of 2024, following close on the success of *Barbie* in 2023. *Wicked* was filmed at Sky Studios Elstree and *Barbie* at Warner Bros. Leavesden, meaning the two leading box-office films of 2024 and 2023 were both made in Hertfordshire. And while



Dinah Lord can barely move for high-end TV and film shoots in her neck of the woods

total UK box office success is still 22% behind 2019's pre-pandemic £1.3bn, PwC predicts a growth trajectory, with revenue expected to rebound to pre-Covid levels, growing at 6% year-on-year to 2028.

The evidence of this growth is there in the raft of productions under way in Hertfordshire – among them a new Guy Ritchie movie at Warner Bros. Leavesden and the return of Margot Robbie to our region in Emerald Fennell's *Wuthering Heights* at Sky Studios Elstree.

When you start to dig about a bit, the scale and range of what is filmed here is really surprising. From *The Day*

THE BOX-OFFICE
LEADERS OF
THE LAST TWO
YEARS WERE
BOTH FILMED IN
OUR REGION

of the Jackal to *Paddington in Peru*, *Strike: The Ink Black Heart* to *Deadpool & Wolverine*, Filming in England helped 31 film and high-end TV productions that came out last year to shoot here in the East.

And production spreads across the region: Creative England's report on filming activity in Cambridgeshire last year shows that, while more than half the productions were filming for only one to three days, the rest were ensconced in the county for considerably longer.

The East also provides many of TV's returners: *Strictly* and *EastEnders* come out of Elstree in Hertfordshire; *The Only Way is Essex*, filmed in Brentwood, is on its 35th series; *24 hours in Police Custody* has been filmed for 10 years in the Bedfordshire police stations of Luton and Bedford; and *Grantchester* has reached its 10th series in Cambridge.

New series gaining traction are also coming out of the region – *The Jury: Murder Trial* was filmed in Chelmsford and the next season is planned to be shot in Cambridge. *Ludwig* is also filming its second series in Cambridge, and *Sweetpea* series two is under way in Essex.

Alongside all this, talented directors, editors and production companies based in the region make a range of outstanding independent programmes without a well-established network or the broadcaster and local initiatives other regions have benefited from.

The priority for RTS East is to seize the opportunities that both parts of the industry in this region offer to nurture a vibrant independent production sector. ■

Dinah Lord is Chair of RTS East and CEO of Caravan.

And on the sixth day the TV gods created entertainment! This spin on chapter one of the Book of Genesis was the publicity line for *The Saturday Night Story*, a 2015 ITV documentary. In one of the easiest TV scheduling decisions ever, it was run over two Saturday nights, offering a clips-and-quijs history of the most significant peaktime of the week, especially for entertainment shows.

Although the viewing and distribution of TV have changed immeasurably across eight decades, there is a visible line from *Variety*, a 1947 Saturday-night show on the then solitary BBC Television Service, presented by Humphrey Lestocq, to today's *Michael McIntyre's Big Show*, 78 years later.

Both were part of a conscious – and paradoxical – attempt to make the most popular night for going out into the most tempting night to stay in. Lestocq (1919–84) – like many early TV presenters, an actor – also started another key part of Saturday broadcasting with the first live children's show, *Whirligig* (BBC, 1950–56), beginning the tradition of TV giving exhausted or amorous parents a lie-in on the first morning without work or school.

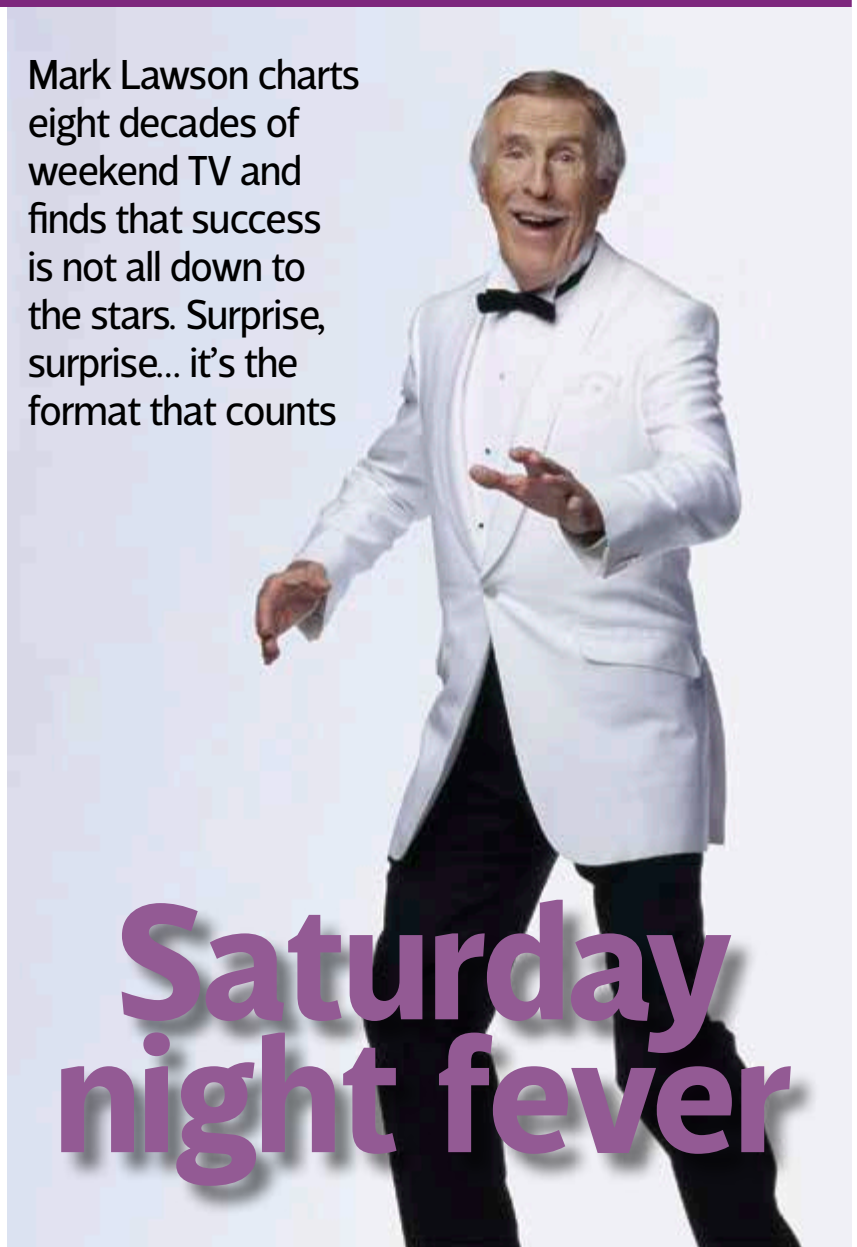
Diurnal identification of the schedules had begun early on: among the very first offerings of BBC Radio were *Friday Night Is Music Night* (a title that still survives on BBC Radio 3) and *Saturday Night on the Light*, the final word a reference to the Light Programme, BBC Radio 2's precursor.

However, at least until Sky Sports' *Monday Night Football* (from 1992), which deliberately echoed the title of an American Football show created by ABC in 1970, the two television days most likely to be day-branded in the UK were Saturday and Sunday.

In the early decades, Saturday was the big entertainment night for the BBC, but Sunday fulfilled that role for ITV. This reflected, in different ways, Britain's residual Christian heritage. Created by a Scottish Presbyterian, John Reith, and generally with at least one bishop on advisory committees, the BBC was careful about content on the Lord's day.

The IBA also imposed some religious regulations on hours and programming, and the closure of shops on Sundays due to the same pious rules made Saturday nights less

Mark Lawson charts eight decades of weekend TV and finds that success is not all down to the stars. Surprise, surprise... it's the format that counts



Saturday night fever

BBC

attractive to the advertisers on which commercial TV depended. Sunday primetime, however, could seed buying ideas for the reopening of the high street on Monday morning.

This meant that, when ITV launched in 1955 as the commercial competitor to the BBC, its first big weekend hit was *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*. It began with the comedian Tommy Trinder introducing live turns, including the Lancastrian singer and movie star Gracie Fields and the American crooner

Guy Mitchell. Set against that Palladium debut, the BBC showed its very different attitude to the seventh day by scheduling theatre, ballet and a spiritual pilgrimage.

Conversely, on the night before, the BBC wielded its heaviest pair of variety weapons – *The Charlie Chester Show*, fronted by a leading comedian of the era whose name was always prefixed by “Cheerful”, and a series entitled *Saturday Night Out*. The commercial network competed with *Saturday Showtime*, hosted by Harry Secombe of the Goons, but directed its biggest stars towards the Palladium show 24 hours later.

Despite ITV's considerable efforts for understandable revenue-pursuing reasons, the UK taboo on Sunday as a fun day proved so strong that a 1986 attempt by Margaret Thatcher's ►

**PIOUS RULES
MADE SUNDAY AS
A FUN DAY MORE
POPULAR FOR ITV**



The 'multi' man: Noel Edmonds struts his ubiquitous stuff in 1989

Alamy

IN YEARS SERVED, NOEL EDMONDS MAY EVEN BETTER BRUCE FORSYTH

► government to allow seven-day shopping – part of a wider deregulation that included TV – was rejected in the House of Commons; Sunday opening was eventually passed in 1994.

That continuing moralistic context may have made the God-fearing BBC even keener to sing and dance on Saturday nights. Saturday can equally be seen as the second of the three weekend nights, with some ITV networks constructed on that basis, most notably London Weekend Television (1968–2002).

For many years, a BBC specialism in Saturday primetime was the variety show built around a singer. In autumn 1971, *The Harry Secombe Show* set a

format in which the host sang solo, introduced other singers performing their hits and then – to close the show – crooned a duet or trio with guests.

Successors included *It's Lulu* and *It's Cliff Richard*, cannily channelling performers associated with an annual BBC Saturday-night ratings-topper, *The Eurovision Song Contest*. These star vehicles popularised within TV the

“shiny-floor shows”, based on set designers’ tendency to mix glitter into the studio stages. Shiny ceilings were often a feature too, thanks to a trend for dangling glitter balls.

Underlining the different rhythms of the two big British broadcasters, one giant of TV had become established since the 1950s as ITV’s “Mr Sunday Night” through his role as the most prominent host of *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* and then *The Bruce Forsyth Show* (ATV, 1965–69). The series that lured him to the BBC was *The Generation Game*, in which members of the public carried out silly challenges, often in fancy dress, to win as many prizes as they could remember as they trundled past on a conveyer belt.

Forsyth’s two spells on that show (1971–77 and 1990–94) – plus his late-career renaissance on *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004–15) and other sixth-day fare including *You Bet!* – added up to around a quarter-century of Saturday nights. However, the reason his run on *The Generation Game* was interrupted stands as a reminder of how treacherous this stretch of the schedules can be.

Bruce Forsyth's Big Night (LWT, 1978) was an audacious attempt by Michael Grade, then LWT’s Director of Programmes, to challenge BBC dominance of Saturday night by building an entire evening around Forsyth, whose monologues and songs linked various game



'Successors to Forsyth': Ant and Dec on *Saturday Night Takeaway*

ITV

shows and comedy sketches. Though the presenter's contract was worth millions in today's terms, the ratings continued to be won by *The Generation Game* under its replacement presenter, Larry Grayson, strongly suggesting that, for all Forsyth's considerable talent, the key to winning the night was more formats than performers. Seemingly accepting this, Forsyth returned to his conveyer belt.

His longevity on *The Generation Game* and then *Strictly Come Dancing* set a template for very long runs of Saturday hits. Yet, in years served, Noel Edmonds may even better Forsyth; he has the extra distinction of having flourished on Saturday mornings – with *Multi-Coloured Swap Shop* (1976–82) – and evenings: *Lucky Numbers* (1978–79), *The Late Late Breakfast Show* (1982–86), *Saturday Roadshow* (1988–90), and then the pinnacle of *Noel's House Party* (1991–99), in which he was notionally hosting a Saturday night at his country pile of Crinkley Bottom.

As acknowledged by the breakfast show reference in one title, these shows were an attempt to draw Edmonds' audiences through his celebrity as a Radio 1 presenter. Indeed, his Saturday visibility was partly due to that being the only gap in his diary; during most of his BBC TV career, he was on the radio either



The shiny-floor show, 21st-century style: *Strictly Come Dancing*

BBC

Monday to Friday and/or Sundays. For TV historians, it's striking that his biggest success – with *House Party*, a comically inventive format that has clearly influenced a time-slot successor, *Michael McIntyre's Big Show* – came after the death of a participant in a stunt on *The Late Late Breakfast Show*. It seems unlikely that a presenter, executives or even network could survive such a tragedy today.

The only candidate for "Mrs Saturday Night" is Cilla Black, whose *Blind Date* (1985–2003) and *Surprise Surprise* (1984–2001, sometimes screened on Sundays) gave ITV two of its strongest

weapons against BBC weekend domination as the easing of trading restrictions made both days increasingly significant for the broadcaster.

In this millennium, Saturday has largely been owned by two Geordie former child actors, with *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* (2002–24) at least matching the popularity of *The Generation Game* and *Noel's House Party*. Anthony McPartlin and Declan Donnelly are the clearest generic successors to Forsyth.

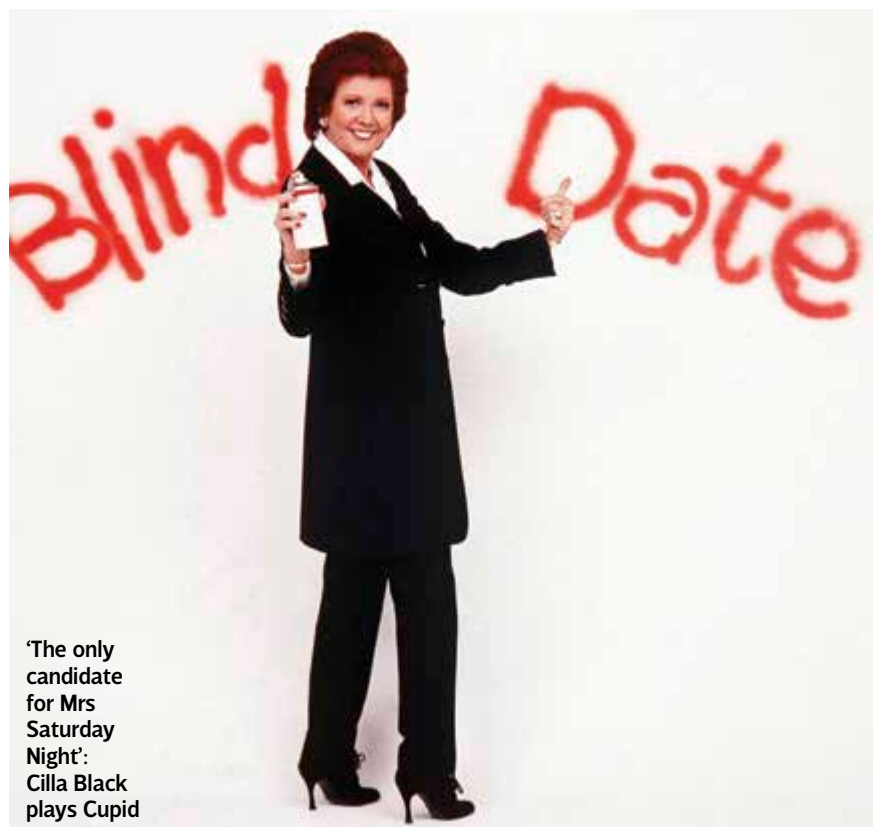
ITV executives and shareholders may note, though, that whereas *Strictly* has long flourished without Bruce (as did *The Generation Game*), *Ant & Dec's* shows feel more umbilically attached to them, which may give the BBC a future weekend advantage.

While BBC Saturdays have generally meant entertainment, one drama series, *Casualty*, has been a fixture for decades – despite the irony of it being transmitted on the night that most patients and doctors consider the worst to visit A&E. The corporation was also clever in establishing early evening as a slot for family-friendly comedy: most notably *'Allo 'Allo!* and *Dad's Army*.

If the TV gods did create entertainment on the sixth day, then the devil – as many in British TV must see it – created streamers. Today the dominant television shows are attached to no particular day, except – for megafans and completists – the one on which Netflix or Disney+ drop them.

Yet terrestrial Saturday TV is still a thing, and the ghost of Humphrey Lestocq would recognise that Claudia Winkleman, Michael McIntyre and Ant & Dec walk on the same floor that he did, shiny or otherwise. ■

ITV



'The only candidate for Mrs Saturday Night': Cilla Black plays Cupid

Maya Rudolph apes Kamala Harris on SNL in the run-up to last year's US election



Survival of the funniest

A biography of Lorne Michaels, creator and showrunner of *Saturday Night Live* – now with his sights on the UK – reveals a ruthless perfectionist. **Simon Shaps** reports

In case you missed it, *Saturday Night Live* has been celebrating its 50th birthday. It is sometimes said that people in US television have two jobs. The first is their day job. The second is figuring out how to fix *Saturday Night Live*.

Nobody can agree when the show was at its brilliant best, but most think it was some time ago. When you were at college – or, say, at the start of the Trump era, when Alec Baldwin was honing his impersonation.

If you have wondered why *SNL* occupies such a unique place in US television history, there is no shortage of ways to find out. Try *Beyond Saturday Night*, a four-part documentary on Sky. There's *Saturday Night*, a feature film about the show's debut on 11 October 1975. There are profiles and magazine articles, and a 50th anniversary live concert featuring Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, Chris Martin and David Byrne.

There's also the three-hour *SNL: 50th Anniversary Special*, which opens with Paul Simon singing *Homeward Bound*,

the song he played on *SNL* with George Harrison in 1976. This time he is joined by Sabrina Carpenter, and other guests include Steve Martin, Tina Fey, Martin Short, David Letterman, Will Ferrell, Scarlett Johansson, Kim Kardashian, Kenan Thompson, Tracy Morgan, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Tom Hanks, Emma Stone, Paul McCartney, Robert De Niro... you get the picture.

Despite this blanket coverage – and the news last month that a UK version of *SNL* is set to premiere on Sky next year – there may still be a much-talked-about sketch, a bust-up, some piece of network chicanery or episode of wild drug-taking or premature death that you missed along the way.

Luckily, it's all there in Susan

Morrison's *Lorne: The Man Who Invented Saturday Night Live*, a 650-page book, 10 years in the writing. I have read it – so that you don't have to. Unless, that is, you work for talent agency WME, where the book is apparently now mandatory reading for all comedy agents.

Morrison has, in fact, written two books. The first is a meticulous account of the rise from precocious teenage comedy talent to gnomish TV titan of one Lorne Lipowitz, aka Michaels, born in Toronto in 1944. Along the way, he found and nurtured generation-defining comedic talents, many of whom venerate and fear him in equal measure, and who paid their dues at that 50th anniversary show.

The second book is an access-all-areas account, interleaved into that narrative, of a typical week in the run-up to the live show at 11.30pm on Saturday night. This climaxes – but not until page 560 – in an account of the 90 minutes that Michaels allows for changes, both minor and major,

**THE QUESTION
NOW IS THIS: WILL
SNL SURVIVE THE
TRUMP ERA INTACT?**

between the end of dress rehearsal and the start of the live show. In that time, Michaels is famous for cutting sketches writers have lovingly crafted through sleepless nights, rewriting the “cold open”, giving tweaks to make-up and wardrobe, directions to the camera crew, notes to the performers and re-ordering the show from opening credits to the final all-cast farewell.

Having completed that task, he has a glass of wine and finally retreats to his command bunker beneath the bleachers to watch the show on air, making trims for timing as it is broadcast. The other famous Paul in his life, McCartney not Simon, says of this process: “I like to see him in action because I know him just as a mate.”

Or as Michaels puts it: “We don’t go on air because we are ready – we are on air because it is 11.30.”

The process of cutting begins in earnest every Wednesday after a table read-through of around 40 sketches. By dress rehearsal, the writers’ work is tantalisingly close to making it to air. It is the survival of the funniest.

One sketch that did make the cut went out in 2019. It is set in a canteen at a Nato summit, with Alec Baldwin’s Trump, James Corden wonderfully cast as Boris Johnson, and other members of the *SNL* ensemble playing the “cool kids” Justin Trudeau and Emmanuel Macron. Trudeau says to Johnson: “Macron and I were talking, and we think you should throw a party... at Buckingham Palace.”

Trump overhears: “Did somebody say something about a party?” he asks.

Trudeau and Macron discourage him from attending – he might need to climb steep stairs, no junk food will be served. And Johnson tells Trump: “You like younger women, but this party



Columbia Pictures and TSG Entertainment

only has Macron’s wife.” That is followed by the entry of Angela Merkel, an award-winning turn by Kate McKinnon, who can barely contain the lustful frisson she feels at meeting Trudeau and Macron.

In just seven minutes, *SNL* has sent up several world leaders. Over its 50 years, very few have publicly taken offence. Rather like British politicians cast as *Spitting Image* puppets, impersonation has been seen as a compliment; making it on to *SNL* is just so cool. Think of Kamala Harris’s full embrace of the skit about her, crazy laugh and all.

Although Morrison touches on *SNL*’s politics, the book can’t fully take account of Trump 2.0 and the threats to all his supposed enemies. Around the 40th *SNL* anniversary in 2015, the soon-to-be president urged the Federal Communications Commission to investigate the show, tweeting: “There must be collusion with the Democrats and, of course, Russia.” He went on: “I once hosted *Saturday Night Live*, and the ratings were Huuuge! Now, however, LM [Lorne Michaels] is angry and

The launch of *SNL* in 1975 as depicted in the film *Saturday Night*, starring Gabriel LaBelle as Lorne Michaels, Kaia Gerber as Jacqueline Carlin and Cory Michael Smith as Chevy Chase

exhausted... it is over for *SNL*... a great thing for America.”

Morrison writes of the 2015 season: “The show was hotter than it had been in years, but it was an uneasy buzz. The writers worried that something they put on air might provoke Trump to blow up the world (or make the IRS audit them).”

A decade later, with the “crooked media” firmly in his sights – not least NBC, home of *SNL* – Trump’s willingness to wage war on those he believes enemies is in no doubt. For Michaels, now 80 – with his 5,000 acres in Maine, homes on the Upper West Side and Amagansett, as well as a holiday house in St Barts – the temptation must be to vacate the hot seat. But he has tried that before and it didn’t work.

As this book makes clear, Michaels has created an enduring and hugely influential television series in his own image. The question now is this: will *SNL* survive the Trump era intact?

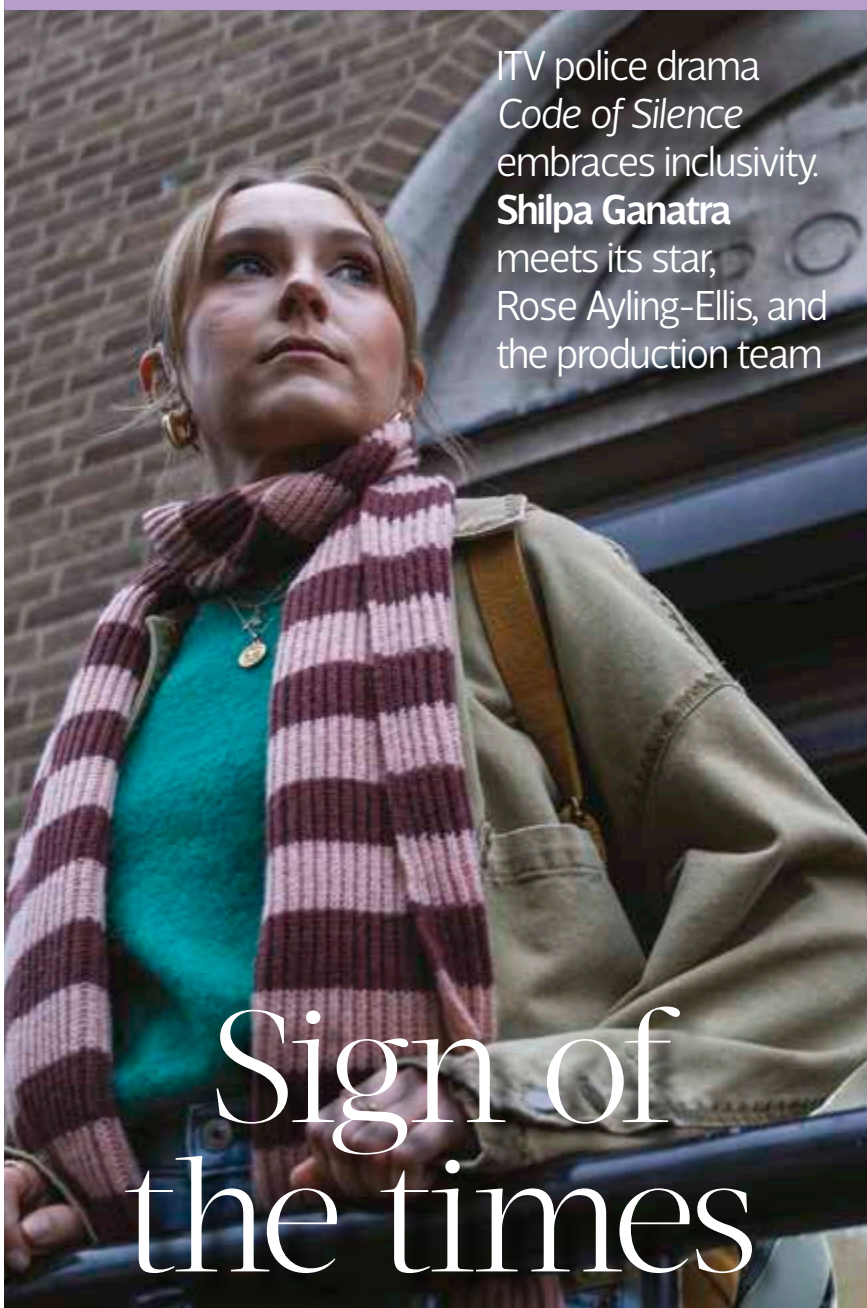
It’s not just the show’s power to make us laugh that matters. It is also its ability to skewer the rich and powerful – of all political persuasions – with the critical intelligence of great satire. And that is what has made it indispensable television for five triumphant decades. ■

Lorne: The Man Who Invented *Saturday Night Live* by Susan Morrison is published by Random House.



Lorne Michaels on *SNL* with actor Robert Wagner in 1989

Alamy



ITV police drama
Code of Silence
embraces inclusivity.
Shilpa Ganatra
meets its star,
Rose Ayling-Ellis, and
the production team

Sign of the times

Making great British TV drama is an uphill struggle. Yet *Code of Silence* is a reminder that, if there's a smart idea on the table, winning a commission can be a doddle. After the pitch, it took just eight hours for ITV to come back to Mammoth Screen with a "yes".

"Polly Hill [Head of Drama] and Kevin Lygo [Managing Director, Media and Entertainment] saw immediately that this was a new and arresting way to tell a contemporary story," says Damien Timmer, Chief Creative Officer and founder of Mammoth Screen, a subsidiary of ITV Studios.

ITV Global, the distribution arm, came on board very quickly, followed

by BritBox, which bought the US rights. "In a world where it's sometimes hard to put things together, this was pretty effortless," says Timmer.

The series, airing this month, follows Alison Brooks (Rose Ayling-Ellis), a deaf police canteen worker whose ability to lip-read catches the attention of two detectives (Charlotte Ritchie and Andrew Buchan) investigating a criminal gang. When Brooks meets the gang's newest recruit, Liam (Kieron Moore), she falls deep into a high-stakes world of risk and duplicity.

Partially deaf writer Catherine Moulton had the idea when she went to her first lip-reading classes in 2021 and discovered that only around 30% of speech is lip-readable. "I learned that you're guessing the rest based on

context, what you know about the person and the setting you're in," she says. "That's exactly what a detective does. It felt like a natural fit that there should be a show about a lip-reader who works with the police."

It certainly felt so for Mammoth Screen, whose previous productions include *The Tower*, *Noughts + Crosses* and *Endeavour*. "We saw potential to tell a mainstream thriller, but with a unique difference. That can intrigue audiences – hearing or non-hearing – around the world," says Timmer.

TV shows with deaf characters have been scarce. Back in 2006, BBC drama *Soundproof* used a blend of British Sign Language (BSL) and speech, with partially deaf actor Joseph Mawle learning BSL for the role. In 2010, BBC One's *The Silence* told the story of a deaf girl who witnesses a murder. Deaf creatives such as Charlie Swinbourne – the writer/director who created storylines in *EastEnders* (starring Ayling-Ellis) and *Casualty* (starring Gabriella Leon) – have helped integrate deaf stories into mainstream TV.

Now, in 2025, things have moved up a gear, with BBC drama *Reunion* – also featuring Ayling-Ellis along with Matthew Gurney as a newly released deaf prisoner – winning acclaim.

Moulton says there is "a big prize to be had" for broadcasters who embrace broader stories. "Around a quarter of people in the UK have some form of either deafness or hearing disability. That means you're missing out on stories that could appeal to at least a quarter of your audience," she says.

Ayling-Ellis agrees: "The amount of [viewing] choice we have means that all broadcasters are looking for something that has never been done before, especially within drama. I hope this is the first wave of many new stories."

Ayling-Ellis signed up to front *Code of Silence* with only an outline script, and relished playing the savvy woman who is unfulfilled by her job in the police canteen. "When she is asked to work with the police – even though

**'BROADCASTERS
ARE LOOKING
FOR SOMETHING
THAT HAS NEVER
BEEN DONE
BEFORE'**

lip-reading isn't exactly what the police think it is – she will do anything to prove she's more capable than society believes. That's why I was excited to play Alison."

Liam, the gang member, sees her frustration, leading to a dynamic that blurs the line between Alison's professional and personal lives which then unravels over six tense episodes.

Filming took place late last year in Hertfordshire, around Hemel Hempstead and Watford; luckily, Watford police station had just moved to new premises, leaving an empty office.

Bryony Arnold, Co-Director of Deaf & Disabled People in TV, was brought in as a producer. Timmer says: "She has an existing relationship with Catherine Moulton, and we felt the show would really benefit from the wisdom and experience of one of the industry's leading accessibility advocates."

With Arnold's help, the production recruited a wealth of deaf, disabled and neurodiverse (DDN) crew to reflect the show's themes. Only 7% of television employees are deaf or disabled, according to Ofcom, so she put out a call on social media, which attracted close to a thousand applications. Each head of department welcomed at least one member from the DDN community.

Pauline Stone, Accessibility Supervisor for the production, along with



Arresting: *Code of Silence*

ITV's in-house Accessibility Coordinator, ensured that the needs of all the production team were catered for – a move that amounted to around 5% of the production budget. Modifications included a photo list of the cast and crew ("which makes it easier for everyone who has to remember a hundred names as quickly as possible," says Arnold), an easy-read call sheet, a BSL interpreter on set every day and a coach for a neurodiverse crew member to ensure they fully understood the day's schedule.

All parts of the production were wheelchair accessible. "One brilliant thing they did was make the dining bus fully accessible by adding ramps and taking out chairs underneath tables," says Arnold. "It was the first time in my career that I've been able

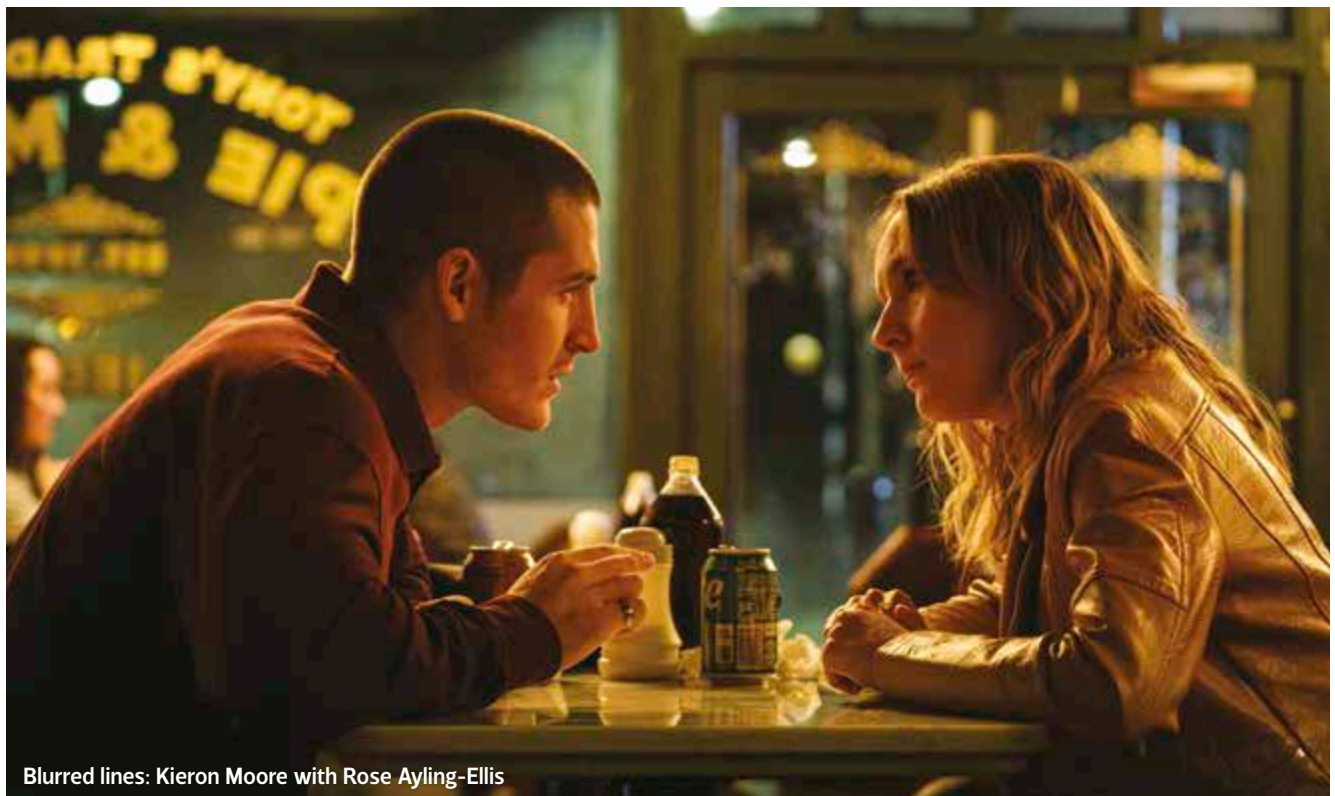
to get on a dining bus." Ayling-Ellis says: "The accommodations made it inclusive. It didn't feel like a big deal and it didn't stand out."

Code of Silence also acted as a pilot for a fast-tracked, freelancer-friendly version of the Access to Work scheme, a government employment initiative to remove barriers for disabled people. Currently, the wait time for applications to the scheme is 35 weeks. Arnold says: "The problem with our industry is that, the moment you get a call, you need to start next week.

"So Pauline and a team streamlined the assessment and did the application on the person's behalf, and then provided support with accessibility requirements until the application could be signed off. It was quite a stressful process, but I'm interested to know what the findings are."

The hope is that, in front of and behind the camera, this production has set a new standard for the industry. Ayling-Ellis and her colleagues trust that it will, at least, reduce the hesitancy associated with DDN conversations. She concludes: "It's important to not be scared of making mistakes or feel like you're going to offend anyone. You need to talk to us to learn and work together." ■

Code of Silence is on ITV1 and ITVX from 18 May



Blurred lines: Kieron Moore with Rose Ayling-Ellis

All photographs: ITV



Rashida Jones as Amanda, a teacher whose pupils witness her tech nightmare in *Common People*

The black of beyond

The opening episode of *Black Mirror*'s seventh series, *Common People*, is described by its director, Ally Pankiw, as a "couch sitter". Rather than the mindless entertainment served up to a couch potato, a couch sitter delivers a gut punch so devastating that the viewer is forced to sit and take stock of their life after the closing credits.

Following last season's foray into the past, series seven sees *Black Mirror* return to its blueprint: dark and despairing near-future dystopia. *Common People* follows Amanda (Rashida Jones), a teacher with a terminal brain tumour who finds a lifeline in the form of an innovative neurological procedure. For \$300 a month, her brain function is copied to a cloud-based server, letting her live a normal life.

Her husband, Mike (Chris O'Dowd), works extra shifts at his factory and the couple just get by. Then Amanda starts spouting inappropriate adverts to her students, discovering later that her bottom-rung brain function

Black Mirror is back, and it's dark enough to scare even Elon Musk. **Caitlin Danaher** wants to bin her iPhone...

subscription has become ad-supported. Soon the price triples, Amanda sleeps for longer (waking hours are expensive), and Mike is debasing himself on a website called Dumb Dummies to afford the next subscription tier. "Plus is actually now Standard, but it's better than Common," explains Gaynor (Tracee Ellis Ross), the sales rep at the health-tech startup, as she touts its latest top tier, "Rivermind Lux".

It's a familiar frustration of today's tech platforms. Series creator Charlie Brooker says he was inspired by the notion of "enshittification". The term, coined by sci-fi author and journalist Cory Doctorow, refers to the degradation of tech platforms over time, squeezing subscribers remorselessly.

See Elon Musk's X, once a home of breaking news and pithy jokes, now a graveyard of bots and AI slop. Or even *Black Mirror*'s own distributor, Netflix, which recently rolled out a cheaper subscription tier, "standard with ads", before hiking prices for standard users. The irony bashed me over the head as a peppy shampoo advert interrupted my own viewing during the episode's bleak mid-point.

Brooker has taken a playful pop at his streamer bosses before. Series six opener *Joan is Awful* featured an SVoD site that mined its subscribers' personal lives to create a TV series generated by AI. The imaginary streamer, Streamberry, even featured Netflix's "tudum" intro sound.

But Brooker denies satirising his streamer in the latest series. "Obviously, the joke is in there about ad tiers and subscription tiers, but those are so universal," he says.

For executive producer Jessica Rhoades, the series opener encapsulates why viewers keep returning to Brooker's terrifying tales of tech gone

wrong. “It underlines one of my favourite things about the tech [Brooker] comes up with – it’s all stuff you’d want to use.” In *Black Mirror*’s first ever sequel, *USS Callister: Into Infinity*, Brooker reprises the characters from the beloved series four episode, with Cristin Milioti as Captain Nanette, leading her crew through the infinite universe of an online video game.

The new episode explores the potential human rights abuses of shadowy tech companies having access to users’ DNA. It’s a distinctly *Black Mirror* concept and could have been ripped straight from current headlines. Series seven launched just weeks after the collapse of biotech ancestry company 23andMe, which left millions of customers’ genetic data at risk of being sold to corporations.

“23andMe just filed for bankruptcy. You should delete your data now,” warned *The New York Times*.

“If you watch *Callister*, you’re like: ‘Who would voluntarily give someone their DNA?’ And then, with 23andMe, my mom was like: ‘Everyone swab your cheek!’” Rhoades says.

Brooker adds. “When things like that happen, on one level, you go: ‘Hooray, free marketing for our show!’ And on another level: ‘Oh my God, I’m worried as a human being existing on a planet where that sort of thing goes on.’”

In contrast to the terrifying tech, perhaps the most enviable device appears in *Eulogy*, the penultimate episode, starring Paul Giamatti as a man who can physically enter old photographs to recover lost memories. With the flip of a switch, his character, Phillip, is instantly transported to a vivid squat party in 80s New York, where he relives meeting the love of his life. It’s one of the most tender, emotionally affecting episodes, rivalled only by *Hotel Reverie*, this season’s answer to the fan-favourite love stories *San Junipero* and *Hang the DJ*.

Hotel Reverie sees Issa Rae star as a Hollywood A-lister who is cast as the new lead in a remake of a black-and-white 1940s romance. The production uses AI to construct a virtual film set featuring the original 1940s actors.

“I was really surprised at how much of a love story it was, and how that was the central focus of the episode,” says Emma Corrin, who stars as the sparkling leading lady, Dorothy. “*Black Mirror* is always original, but [the love story] felt unusual!”

Dorothy’s character, Clara, falls head



Charlie Brooker

‘I’VE GOT BOYS OF 11 AND 13. OF COURSE, I WORRY ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE EXPOSED TO’

over heels for Alex, a fellow guest at the hotel, played by Rae’s character. Chaos ensues as the two characters from wildly different eras stumble over anachronisms as they fall in love. Corrin says: “[Issa] is incredible and has a command over comic timing and humour, and I’m very new to that. So it was like watching a masterclass.”

The episode grapples with an existential threat to film and TV – the use and abuse of AI. For those in Corrin’s profession, films without actors are no longer a dystopian technological “what

if” but a fast-approaching reality. “It’s a very real fear. It’s terrifying, the idea that people’s likenesses could be recreated,” Corrin says. “I hate it, and I don’t understand why it’s necessary. I think we’ve been doing fine.”

Indeed, the series has launched at a time of rising concern in the UK about technology, including political pressure for a ban on smartphones for under-16s, partly in response to the devastating impact of social media algorithms and their toxic effect on teenagers, as explored in Netflix’s *Adolescence*.

For Brooker and Rhoades, both parents of teenagers, the online world is a source of huge anxiety. “I’ve got boys of 11 and 13. Of course, I worry about what they might be exposed to,” Brooker says.

Yet there are glimmers of hope. For Rhoades, the next generation’s rejection of the curated, photoshopped lives presented on platforms like Instagram is a positive. “They want to be real with each other. Even if it’s on devices, they want to show each other themselves at their core,” she says of her 13-year-old daughter’s generation.

Nor will Brooker be hiding out in some underground, wi-fi-free bunker any time soon. “Having kids, you’ve unfortunately nailed a stake in the future, so you have to have some optimism,” he says. “They seem pretty amazing, the next generation. So, hopefully, they’ll dig us out of the shit we’ve dug ourselves into” ■

Series seven of *Black Mirror* is available on Netflix



Paul Giamatti on set for *Eulogy*

All photographs: Netflix



The engine has stalled...

Cut back: *Hollyoaks*

No one wants to shout “Fire!” in a crowded theatre. So says Wales-based former *Doctors* writer Phil Ralph. But if ever there was a time to do it, that time is now. And rather than panic, the response should be urgent firefighting.

It has been a perfect storm: the brief post-Covid boom in commissioning veering towards “bust”; the streamers driving up production costs; BBC funding dropping by 30% since 2010; advertising revenue falling at Channel 4, ITV and Channel 5; and the cost-of-living crisis affecting businesses as well as households.

This storm has devastated our nations and regions disproportionately, with long-running Midlands drama *Doctors* axed last year, and Liverpool-produced *Hollyoaks* cutting 30 cast and 130 staff. Then ITV announced that the northern soaps *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* will have less airtime from 2026.

Now *River City*, which won an RTS Scotland Award for Drama as recently as 2023, will be cancelled after almost 25 years. BBC Scotland commissioning

Precious jobs and skills are being lost across the UK as cuts to long-running TV drama hit home. **Carole Solazzo** looks for jump leads

editor Gavin Smith says: “It has been a difficult decision. But the show’s audience has dropped by about 40% over the last five years. It’s part of a strategic shift to give viewers more of what we believe they’re after.”

Script editor on the show, Jamie Mackinlay, describes the news as “a hammer blow to the industry in Scotland”. With 66 episodes a year produced at its Dumbarton base, Mackinlay fears “the impact on the ecosystem of the industry in Scotland has been underestimated”.

BBC Scotland, meanwhile, has announced three new commissions. “It’s a start, not an end,” Smith tells *Television*. “BBC investment in Scotland drama over the next three years is increasing to £95m. That’s before

that money has leveraged additional millions from distributors and co-producers. This will lead to more jobs in the Scottish sector.”

But Mackinlay warns: “While it’s exciting to have these new premium dramas, I’m concerned because I don’t think you can replace the [training] model offered by long-running drama. You don’t have the luxury of time on a drama that is only six episodes and shot over just three months.”

New entrants to the industry have traditionally started their careers in two ways: on a short-run drama, each head of department takes on a trainee for the duration of the shoot; and on soaps, there are regular call-outs for trainees, sometimes across the board and sometimes directed at under-represented groups.

They start as runners, either in a specific department or moving between departments, on short-term contracts, with the possibility of extending these if they impress. From there, they can be offered an assistant position, leading to a staff contract. Some become freelance and dip in and out of the soaps between other drama jobs.

“*River City* was great at bringing people through via connections with training organisations,” Smith acknowledges. “But the shorter-run series have training built in. As do third-party shows like [long-running historical fantasy drama] *Outlander*.”

Yet Mackinlay observes: “I worry for sustainability. It’s brilliant to have investment but there are no guarantees for locals to work on those shows, especially writers and editorial. They’ll have a showrunner and their own teams. *River City* is a big employer. There are a lot of people worried that they’ll have to move south to get work.”

This lack of sustainability in the UK industry is also cited by Ralph, who has earned nothing from screenwriting since his last *Doctors* commission more than a year ago. He claims that the axing of long-running shows is “gutting the infrastructure of the industry”.

Trainees on short placements return to their “temporary” jobs when the work ends. And experienced staff made redundant by the closure of long-running series won’t be there to pass on skills and knowledge.

They face stark choices. Some are relocating, but there’s an emotional and a financial cost. Relocating if you have children and a mortgage isn’t always possible as it involves leaving families and other support networks.

Some are staying in the industry but taking a step down the ladder in terms of position and pay – for example, production designers working as art directors – and digging into savings to make up the shortfall in salary.

Many are leaving the industry altogether after months of failure to secure another job. “If you eat away at the heart of the industry like this, you no longer have an industry,” Ralph warns.

According to Birmingham-based *Doctors* writer Claire Bennett, things are no better in the Midlands. She has had meetings with Steven Knight’s Digbeth Loc Studios, but they are a long way off going into production.

Her fellow writer Ralph comments: “There’s a reason why writers like Russell T Davies, Sarah Phelps and Jack Thorne get continually commissioned. It’s because they’re very good. But they got that good because they had the opportunity [in long-running drama] to get all that screenwriting experience.

“The problem is that, if we commission the same writers, we get the same

voices, the same themes, and TV becomes a monoculture.”

Bennett says: “There is *some* light. Producers Will Trotter and Ollie Kent [who recently set up Mill Bay Media, a Birmingham-based scripted indie] have seen the big hole in the middle of the country that is the Midlands and know there is skill and talent here.”

As well as the financial and emotional costs, there is a cultural impact. “Television is one of the great drivers

of storytelling in our nation,” Sister co-founder Jane Featherstone recently told *Broadcast*.

Given the evident importance of long-running series to the entire drama ecosystem, Mackinlay asks: “Why aren’t we future-proofing long-running shows, and thinking about how we can appeal to audiences in Britain today?”

Tom Stokoe, Head Set Dresser on *Hollyoaks*, lost half his team when the



Axed: BBC Scotland’s *River City*

BBC

‘WHY AREN’T WE THINKING ABOUT HOW WE CAN APPEAL TO AUDIENCES IN BRITAIN TODAY?’



Curtailed: Charlotte Jordan as Daisy in *Coronation Street*

ITV

show was cut from 115 minutes of weekly screen time to 60. The cuts were brutal, but with a mix of a streaming-first strategy, savvy marketing, and recreating brand partnerships with advertisers and government campaigns, *Hollyoaks*, to Liverpool’s great advantage, has thrived.

Stokoe says that, on the “untapped market” of YouTube, “Channel 4 is saying that we had 3.5m views globally last year.” “Younger viewers watch short clips on social media platforms,” he says. “Our digital department at Lime is great at getting content and storylines out in just a 30-second clip. That creates a hook, so they come in [to watching the show] that way.

“Liverpool is booming for TV production,” concludes Stokoe, “and reaping the rewards from *Hollyoaks* is [BBC crime drama] *This City Is Ours*. One of the main exec producers, a producer and one of the directors previously worked at Lime Pictures. And 80% of the design team came through that design runner role on *Hollyoaks*.”

Clearly, it’s in everyone’s interest to create and maintain a healthy and sustainable UK television industry. So call the fire brigade! ■

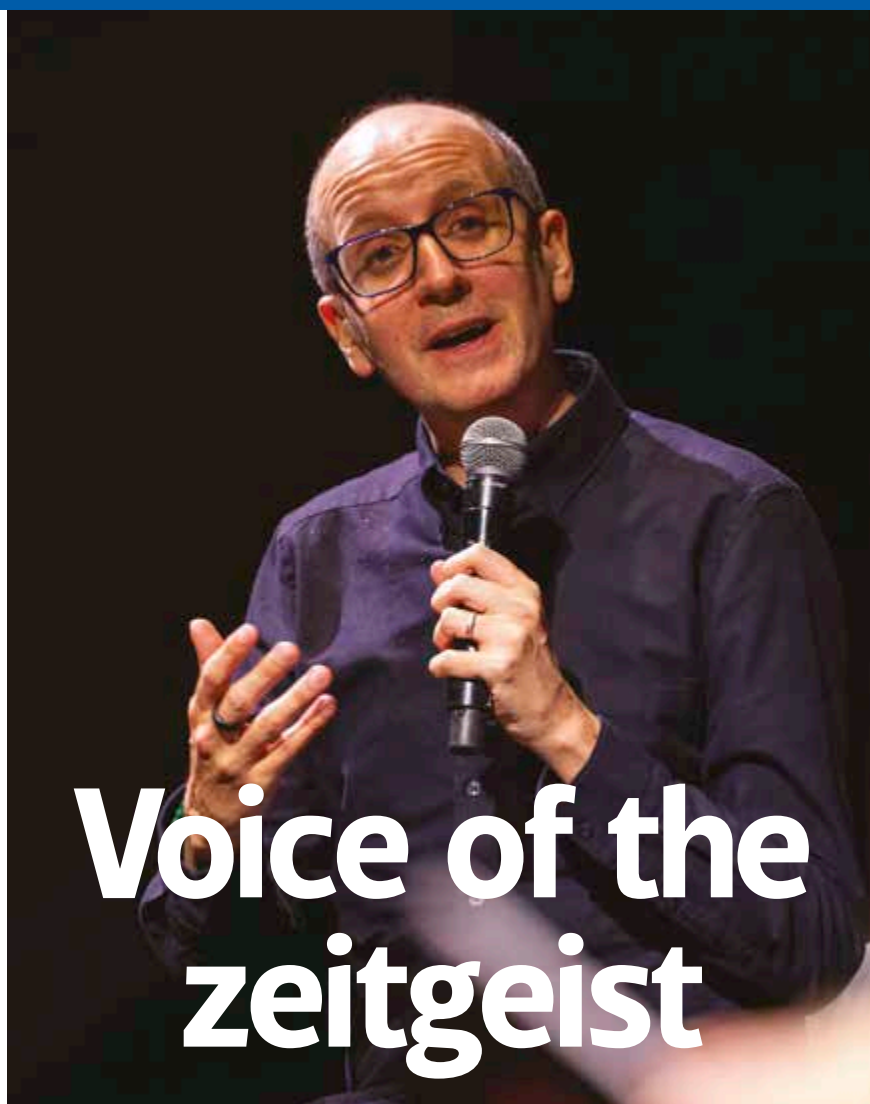
Simon Bucks celebrates Jack Thorne, the maverick writer whose latest TV hit, *Adolescence*, sparked a national conversation

The words “Be good” are tattooed on Jack Thorne’s wrist. It says much about one of our most lauded and in-demand TV dramatists. Two Thorne hits, *Adolescence* and *Toxic Town*, have made headlines this year; another two – *The Hack* and *Lord of the Flies* – are likely to make waves; and filming has begun on Channel 4 series *Falling*, starring Paapa Essiedu and Keeley Hawes in what is billed as Thorne’s “first ever love story”.

“Be good” is a line from Thorne’s favourite film, *ET*. He even named his son Elliott after the boy who befriends an alien. “It’s the best film about loneliness ever made, and the best film about friendship ever made,” Thorne told *Desert Island Discs* on BBC Radio 4.

“The tattoo is to remind Jack that he must be,” says Sophie Gardiner, executive producer at AC Chapter One, a UK production company with which Thorne has worked. “I can’t think of a single professional who needs such a reminder less.”

For Thorne, being good is not about being a brilliant writer (though he is). It’s about being a caring human being, say colleagues. No surprise, then, that much of his work focuses on the disadvantaged, distressed and downtrodden. “Being good is Jack’s vision for life,” says Patrick Spence, an executive producer of Thorne’s *The Hack* (out soon on ITV). “He’s a gentle, kind soul.



Netflix

But that doesn’t mean he bends to someone else’s will, or that he doesn’t have fierce passions and ideas.”

“He’s humble, gentle and compassionate but also fiercely intelligent,” agrees Genevieve Barr, an actor and writer who has worked with Thorne and campaigned with him on disability rights. “He is motivated by social injustice. You can see it in his writing. Shows like *Best Interests*, *Toxic Town*, and

Adolescence all come from a position of ‘There’s something that’s not right’. That’s a particular fire in his belly.”

Thorne considers himself part of the disabled community, originally because he suffered from the skin condition chronic urticaria – which forced him to temporarily drop out of Cambridge University – and latterly after being diagnosed as autistic.

Barr, who is deaf, was one of several co-founders with Thorne of Underlying Health Condition, which campaigns for disabled people in TV. “Jack was passionate about it. The intention was always to gather a collective, and Jack drove that. So when he was asked to do the 2021 MacTaggart Lecture, it was an opportunity to make the campaign visible.” Thorne made headlines when he declared: “TV has failed disabled people. Utterly and totally.” It triggered the TV Access Project a year later, with 10 UK broadcasters committing to full inclusion by 2030.

Later, Barr and Thorne co-wrote *Then Barbara Met Alan*, the true story of Barbara



‘Lauded’: Owen Cooper in *Adolescence*

Netflix

Lisicki and Alan Holdsworth, the campaigners who founded the Disabled People's Direct Action Network.

Thorne's mentoring was transformative for Barr. "It was the biggest input of confidence I've had in 12 years in TV. Jack's approach is that there's no right or wrong way to be a writer. You just put it on the page and there is permission to be creative and free, and to write without any expectation."

Billy Mager, the deaf writer of BBC One's *Reunion*, is another young dramatist who took Thorne's advice. "Billy got a bit stuck," explains Mark Herbert, executive producer of *Reunion* and *Adolescence*. "He asked, 'Can I reach out to Jack?' It was a crazy, busy time for Jack, doing *Adolescence* and *Lord of the Flies*. But he read one of the scripts and gave Billy the most incredible notes."

Thorne's prolific output revolves around a frantic schedule. "He works harder than anyone I know," says Spence. Is that to prove something? "He hasn't got anything to prove," says Spence. "He just loves writing. Apart from being a great dad and husband, that's his purpose in life. He wants us to understand ourselves better and that's enough to get him up."

Herbert adds: "It's infectious and joyful. On *Adolescence*, we were having problems doing the 'one shot' classroom scene in a school with 300 kids. Jack was on holiday in France with his wife and son, but he was texting: 'I'm going to come back; I can make it better'. It's an incredible passion."

Herbert reassured him that the team could handle it and managed to dissuade him from flying home.

That intense work ethic brings meticulous attention to detail. "I've watched Jack rewrite a script 15 times," says Spence. "He's happy to keep going back and reworking a draft – not because somebody says it has to be done, but because he wants to keep improving it."

"Thorne's great strength is his craftsmanship," says Herbert. "He provides a solid blueprint and foundation which gives everybody else the confidence to go off-piste."

Spence says: "Very few writers can take the risks he takes in form and style, and still allow you to feel you are watching real people. The objective of everything that he writes is to comment on our shared humanity, not to look clever by adopting some format."

Thorne's craftsmanship will be evident in *The Hack*, a seven-part series

'THE OBJECTIVE OF EVERYTHING THAT HE WRITES IS TO COMMENT ON OUR SHARED HUMANITY'

telling two true stories: one about phone hacking, one about a murder. The stories are interlocking but, intriguingly, episodes are written and shot in alternating and contrasting styles. "Jack devised the format of separate episodes, separate styles," explains Spence. "But far more importantly than the conceptual idea, which was absolutely his, was his ability to deliver it. Very few writers can execute an idea like that with such emotional depth, humanity and skill."

A hallmark of Thorne's work is his versatility, ranging from the fantasy of his stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* to the gritty TV drama *Help*, about disabled people during the Covid pandemic. "He is like the Beatles," says Spence. "There is no such thing as a standard Beatles song and there is no obvious Jack Thorne show."

Everyone agrees that Thorne is

self-deprecating. "He can be worried about coming across as too serious, so he's always on a slight correction course," says Barr. "You see the echoes of somebody who takes the mickey out of himself before he has the mickey taken out of him."

On the set of *Adolescence*, the crew sent up his "Be good" tattoo with home-made ones of their own, saying "Don't be a dick". Thorne took it in good part, as he did when Shane Meadows cast him in a rare onscreen appearance as Carrotbun in *This Is England '86*. "He couldn't find an actor lonely or weird enough to play the role," Thorne joked on *Desert Island Discs* (Thorne co-wrote three of the *This Is England* series with Meadows as well as *The Virtues*.)

Lonely? Barr says the only people who know Thorne well are Rachel, his wife, and his son. When he married Rachel – who he met on a train – he chose his sister as his "best man".

"That sums Jack up," says Herbert. "It was a beautiful wedding and she did the funniest best-man speech I've ever heard. He is unconventional, he does the unexpected, but he does it with such heart and integrity that it just works." ■



True story: Arthur Hughes and Ruth Madeley in *Then Barbara Met Alan*

BBC

It's hard to name a more feted screenwriter right now than Peter Straughan. His adapted screenplay for Vatican drama *Conclave* won him an Oscar, a Bafta, a Golden Globe and the Critics Choice Award. The Gatehead-born writer, who famously skipped the Oscars parties to celebrate instead with a cup of tea, was also nominated in the writer's category at this year's RTS Programme Awards for the BBC's *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light* but lost out to the Jilly Cooper romp *Rivals*.

"You can't win them all," he now says, with a smile, back at his home in Hove, Sussex.

He remembers that the production was a challenge. Like many connected with the adaptation of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy, Straughan took a pay cut to get the project over the line. External scenes had to be switched to interiors to stay within budget, which in turn meant rewrites. "We are all used to cutting our cloth and, as a writer, I'm used to edits. But it hurts when good material is lost," he admits.

He echoes the concerns of *Wolf Hall* director Peter Kosminsky that UK public service broadcasters are being priced out by streamers when it comes to high-end drama: "Peter's idea of a levy for streamers could be an interesting solution. There's a healthy side to competition, but it would be wrong to seriously limit the type of drama state broadcasters can afford because of inflation in production costs caused by the streamers.

"We also need to recognise the importance of theatre. It's the route I came up in, and you only have to look at my first TV script [*Walters*] and my most recent movie [*Conclave*] to see how important theatre has been in allowing actors to learn and perfect their craft. It's a symbiotic ecosystem. If you cut off one of those limbs, the whole body suffers."

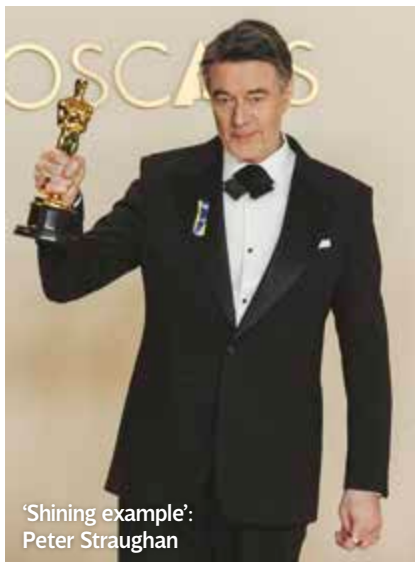
A recent return to Live – the Newcastle theatre dedicated to new writing, where he began his career as writer-in-residence – has reignited his passion for the stage. "I found it very moving to be back there. It made me realise I'd like to return to theatre."

His first play *Bones* – a black comedy about an infamous London gangster

Peter Straughan, adapter of *Wolf Hall*, tells Graeme Thompson that high-end TV drama must be nurtured and why theatre is crucial for fostering screen talent

Master of the quill

kidnapped during a visit to Tyneside – resulted in a commission to write his first TV script, for ITV's Tyne Tees. That was *Walters* (2001), one of six half-hour dramas made for the *First Cut* series, which was co-funded with the



'Shining example': Peter Straughan

local screen agency to showcase writers and directors new to television.

Straughan's screenplay, directed by Live's Max Roberts, centred on restaurant staff with dreams of being in the movies. It mirrored his own love of the vintage films he watched while growing up on Tyneside and his early ambitions to be an actor. The cast was a Who's Who of Geordie acting royalty, including Alun Armstrong, Denise Welch, Trevor Fox, Robson Green and *Billy Elliot* screenwriter Lee Hall.

"That was the beauty of live theatre and regional television back then. The TV station could show local content and there was a lot of loyalty from the actors and technicians. I remember the sense of being able to experiment. We were encouraged to try things out. James Corden said the same about the early days of *Gavin & Stacey*.

"If you have to justify yourself entirely by ratings, nothing good will get done. That's the beauty of the BBC. Ratings should not be the only

Alamy



Mark Rylance and Damian Lewis as Cromwell and Henry VIII in *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light*, adapted by Straughan

Chandleresque detective series that will be filmed in Berlin.” Straughan hopes that *Berlin Noir* will offer a similar experience to the one he enjoyed in Rome for *Conclave*. “I think of myself as a film screenwriter and usually it’s quite a solitary existence. You spend a lot of time on your own, imagining the film in your head.

“But with *Conclave*, I was able to be part of the team all the way through. I get the impression that TV gives you that as a writer. So I’m enjoying being part of the development of *Berlin Noir*.”

He is also working on an original film script: *Folio* is a Jacobean road movie featuring a pair of actors who, following Shakespeare’s death, go to great lengths to gather and reassemble the Bard’s plays and publish them in the famous First Folio.

He cites among his movie influences

‘IF YOU HAVE TO JUSTIFY YOURSELF ENTIRELY BY RATINGS, THEN NOTHING GOOD WILL GET DONE’

BBC

measure for commissioners.” He welcomes the recent resurgence in production across his native North East, along with development of studios in Sunderland and Hartlepool. “I’d like to contribute by setting something up myself. It would have to be a good project – nothing tokenistic. Islands of encouragement are important, particularly in areas so far from London.

“When you’re from a place like this, it’s that sense of ‘Can I really do this?’. When I first got an agent and was asked if I’d like to write for TV and film, I said no. Back then, the screen industry felt like an alien world to me.

“If you’re in a place where productions are happening and crews are working, you can imagine how you might fit in. If that was happening when I was first starting out, I’d have probably graduated to it much sooner.”

Straughan is a fan of bursary and mentor schemes, including the one managed by the RTS, which has supported nearly 400 students from

lower-income backgrounds and kick-started many screen careers. “Bursaries were life-changing in my early career as a playwright in Newcastle. And it wasn’t just the money. I was mentored by [Live’s director] Max Roberts, as well as the people at New Writing North. Later on, Anthony Minghella [*The English Patient* director] was incredibly generous towards me. Mentors can do so much for your self-belief. That kind of encouragement and reassurance can be the difference between carrying on and giving up.”

How does he feel about his current haul of awards? “Well, it won’t do me any harm,” he observes. “But it hasn’t made much of a difference so far. I have a backlog of projects, mostly adaptations, that I’m working on.”

He is excited about his next TV assignment, for Apple TV+ and Bad Wolf. “It’s an adaptation of Philip Kerr’s *Berlin Noir* trilogy, set in 1928 and through to the end of the Weimar Republic and rise of the Nazis. It’s a

the Coen brothers, Robert Bresson and old Hollywood film noir. As for his TV picks: “I like *Severance* [Apple TV+]. It’s really interesting. And I thought *Shōgun* [Disney+] was great. It was nice to keep bumping into the *Shōgun* team on the awards circuit.

“I know I’m coming to it a bit late, but I’m enjoying season one of *The White Lotus* [Sky Atlantic]. I’ve always liked Mike White’s writing.”

Straughan’s generosity in assessing other writers is a trait recognised by his Live Theatre mentor, Max Roberts: “Despite his tremendous success, the multiple awards and critical acclaim, Peter’s warmth, his self-deprecating humour and his gentle and humble demeanour are still evident in spades, just as much as they were when I first got to know him as a young English graduate from Newcastle University.

“He’s a shining example to all those aspiring writers, actors and artists from places like the North East that dreams really can come true.” ■

Laura Mansfield, CEO of ScreenSkills, remains resolutely upbeat about the screen sector's future despite challenging times. **Steve Clarke** reports



ScreenSkills

First lesson? The glass is half full...

Laura Mansfield sounds like a glass-half-full kind of person. Her body language is that of a can-do leader. This is just as well, as she has assumed the leadership of ScreenSkills at a challenging time for many of those seeking careers in the television industry.

Research published by the training body last month offered some stark statistics on the lack of jobs in the UK screen sector since the post-Covid production boom burst, forcing many to work elsewhere as they wrestled with rent or mortgage payments.

Among the key findings, 57% of respondents said they have struggled to find work in the last year, while 73%

said they have extra work capacity. Overall, the UK screen sector is working at only 60% capacity. A third of people said they were dissatisfied with their career progress during 2024.

The report identified an 18% decline in commissioning activity since 2022 and evidence of less risk-taking as broadcasters, not least the BBC, relied on tried-and-tested shows.

While Greater London remains the largest driver of screen employment, 60% of the workforce is located outside London. Each local screen industry faces specific challenges. Workers in the south-west and Scotland face retention issues stemming from low demand for unscripted projects. London is seeing pressure on VFX and

craft roles, while the north-east, north-west, Yorkshire and the Midlands have a proportionally greater need to upskill workers in technical roles.

"Some of the things we've found out have been sobering," says Mansfield. When she arrived at ScreenSkills in early 2024, she brought more than 30 years of TV production experience; 25 of them were spent as Managing Director of Outline Productions, the company she set up in 1999 with Helen Veale. One of Outline's best-known shows, *The House of Tiny Tearaways*, was nominated for several RTS awards.

Like many senior TV people, she began her career at the BBC. Straight from Cambridge, where she read modern languages (she is fluent in French and Spanish), she joined Janet Street-Porter's fabled "yoof TV" operation in Manchester, working on such programmes as *The Travel Show* and *Reportage*. "It was a great time to be a young person starting out in the TV industry," Mansfield recalls. "There were large teams of young people. Here was a whole department focused on taking risks, giving us opportunities and absolutely dedicated to training."

After the BBC, she headed to London to polish her CV on such high-profile entertainment programmes as *Euro-trash* and *The Clive James Show*. Such opportunities are unlikely to be available to those at the start of their TV careers today. And that's where ScreenSkills comes in. The body, which replaced Creative Skillset in 2018, offers skills support covering animation, children's TV, film, games, high-end television (HETV), unscripted TV and visual effects.

It also provides information on where to find training across sectors and hosts a range of e-learning modules on its website. ScreenSkills oversees five Skills Funds (Animation, Children's TV, Film, HETV and Unscripted). The first four are paid for by the industry from voluntary levy contributions, based on a percentage of production budgets; the Unscripted TV

'IT'S A PROBLEM, FOR YOU, AND THE INDUSTRY, IF YOU'VE ONLY GOT 30% OF A JOB'



LOL: Last One Laughing, a favourite of the ScreenSkills CEO

Amazon MGM Studios

enjoying *The White Lotus*, *LOL: Last One Laughing* and *Adolescence*, draws attention to what the new research shows about screen-sector diversity. “Craft and technical departments are more diverse than other areas of the industry,” she says.

“There’s also a range of statistics that highlight the fact that we’ve come quite a long way in terms of diversity, but we’ve still got a long way to go. We’re maybe doing better than before – 14% of the workforce are from black, Asian, mixed or other ethnic groups. But that varies very much according to nation and region.”

Last year, more than 29,000 people used ScreenSkills’ resources, principally training courses. However, she says that the organisation is only one part of a bigger ecosystem working with around 100 training partners across the UK and a similar number of indies, as well as bodies like the RTS and Bafta.

She wants ScreenSkills to play a part in ensuring that the screen industries can secure sustainable growth and so enable people and companies to plan for the long term. “I’m very optimistic. We need to face up to the challenges and the uncomfortable truths and then do something about them.

“Careers aren’t going to be perfect but we have an extraordinary ecosystem in the UK with a combination of streamers, PSBs, indies, rights holders and incoming investment. That’s unique and very special. We’re part of that and our incredible freelancers are part of that. It’s vital to support one another as we navigate unknown waters.

“Ultimately, we can’t create jobs but we can offer environments where creatives can become job generators themselves.” ■

Skills Fund is mandatory, with equal contributions from broadcasters, streamers and indies. Nearly a quarter of a million people are registered on ScreenSkills’ database.

Since arriving at the helm, Mansfield has moved fast. She has formed partnerships with other industry bodies, including the Creative Diversity Network (CDN), Channel 4 and the BFI, as well as offering greater transparency in its governance and work. ScreenSkills’ ability to help prepare new entrants for a TV career is clearly paying dividends: its HETV Skills Fund paid for 14 trainees to work on *Adolescence*.

Lisa Opie, the ex-BBC Studios chief who runs gaming company Ubisoft Reflections, now chairs a smaller, more skills-focused board.

The recently published research, commissioned jointly with 4Skills and undertaken by Ampere Analysis, reveals the worrying lack of work for those wanting a TV career. “If you’ve only got 30% of a job, that’s a problem. Therefore, as an industry we have a challenge,” says Mansfield, a former Chair of Pact.

“We can either help you figure out how you can upskill – so you can fill the other 70% of your time – or, in this modern world, help you to have more of a portfolio career. Then you can do the screen industry jobs you love but perhaps accompany them with other ways of earning a living.”

The Ampere report found that underemployment was particularly acute in junior- and mid-role levels, with evidence that the recent gains in creating a more diverse TV workforce risked being undermined as those from black, Asian and other ethnic groups who had recently joined the

sector were leaving because of the job shortage. Many respondents said they wanted more training in pitching skills and management.

Depressingly, senior roles in TV still tend to be male, while the sector remains predominantly middle-class: just 31% of respondents said they came from a working-class background. The paradox is that there is more content available than ever before.

The UK’s world-renowned creativity will ensure the industry’s future growth, Mansfield insists, adding: “Leadership and management is an ongoing, perennial skills gap that we’ve known about for a long time. Also, there’s a real interest in AI and virtual production.”

She is a great supporter of the new RTS Mini MBA in Television and Streaming Media. ScreenSkills is helping to fund 12 MBA students via the Adobe Foundation and ScreenSkills’ Unscripted TV Skills Fund and providing coaching to ensure students obtain the most from the course.

Mansfield, who has recently been



Adolescence gets Mansfield’s vote

Netflix

Bang the drum for Brum

Joe Lycett's new Sky documentary aims to foster UK-US friendship. The RTS heard how his beloved home city sparked a peace pact

At a time when the "special relationship" between the UK and the US is on a knife edge, one man is doing his bit to extend the hand of friendship across the Atlantic. Comedian Joe Lycett has brought together 19 places called Birmingham in both countries to make a formal alliance – which, he claims, could stand in for Nato if necessary!

Coming to our defence would be the United States of Birmingham, the name of Lycett's new Sky TV series.

The places, ranging from Birmingham, New Jersey (population 32), to one of the largest cities in Alabama, have all signed a friendship agreement, including the pledge to provide an alternative to Nato if the need arises. Which might happen sooner than they think, given Donald Trump's stance on the security pact.

At a jubilant RTS Midlands premiere

to launch the series, Lycett said: "At the time, that line was just a joke, but with recent events we might have to invoke it. Imagine... me and Alison Hammond going up against Russia!"

Joe Lycett's United States of Birmingham is a love letter to his home city. The heartwarming series celebrates Birmingham at a time when it has been in the news for all the wrong reasons, with headlines telling of mountains of rubbish resulting from a bin strike.

Sky commissioning editor Barbara Lee introduced the RTS screening of the first of four episodes: "This was the easiest commission I've ever done; it took just one meeting.

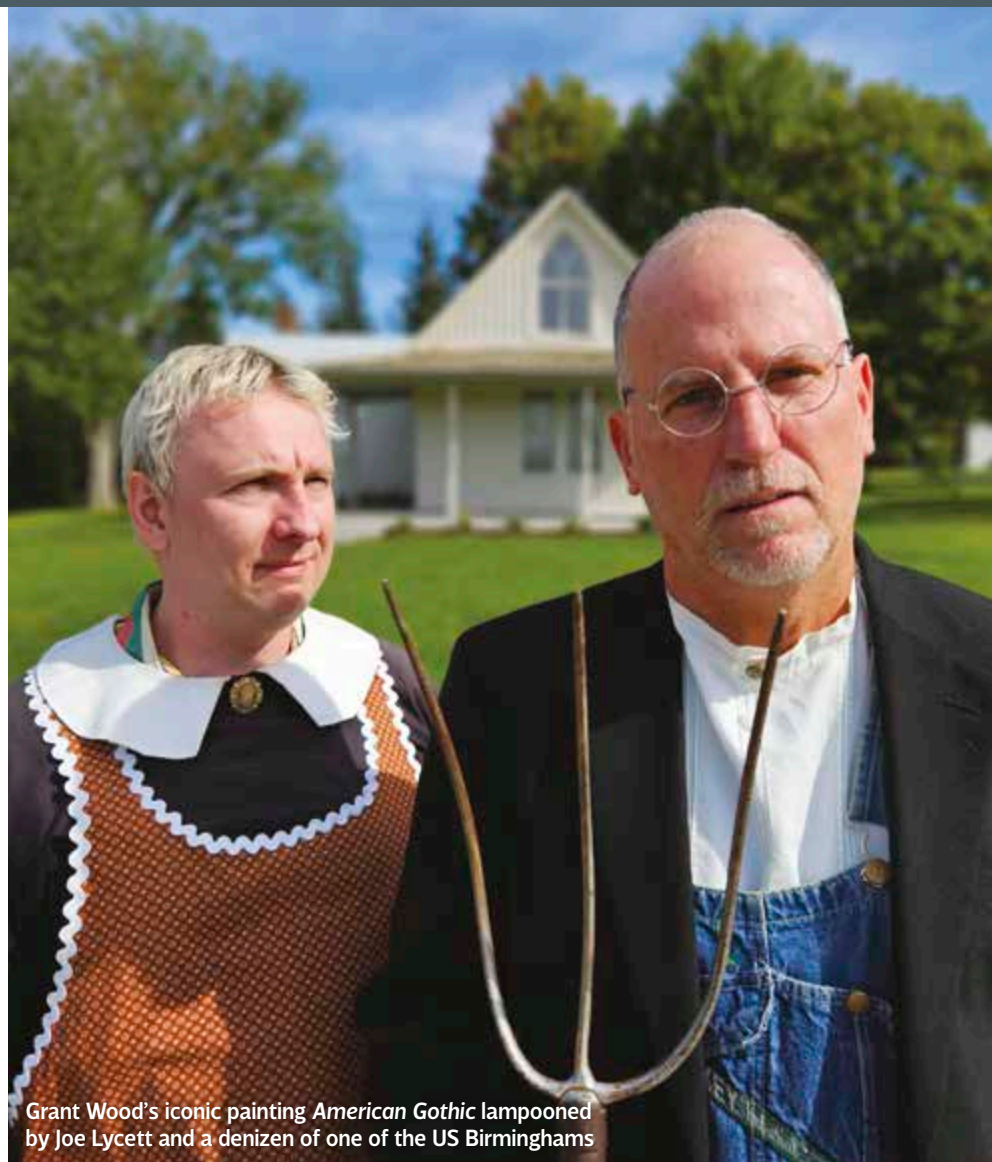
"It was so irresistible. Joe talks about Birmingham with such deep affection that it's contagious. The show is a joy, full of laughs and love. He met the most extraordinary people. We are living in divisive times, but this shows that people are just wonderful."

The premiere was a brilliantly

Brummie event, from the presence of Lord Mayor Ken Wood, UB40's Robin Campbell and Mr Egg (the personification of an infamous greasy spoon in the city), to the cushions on the stage emblazoned with the faces of Birmingham-born *This Morning* presenters Alison Hammond and Cat Deeley.

Lycett took those cushions with him in a bus he drove 2,000 miles across North America, visiting all the Birminghams; although he didn't get as far as the one in Canada or the crater on the Moon called Birmingham. On his journey, he dispensed gifts of city products, including Cadbury's chocolate, Barbara Cartland novels, Bird's custard, Typhoo tea and HP sauce.

The series is made by Birmingham production company North One, with whom Lycett also makes *Travel Man* for Channel 4. The director and producer is Nicola Silk, who lives around the corner from Lycett in the suburb of Kings Heath.



Grant Wood's iconic painting *American Gothic* lampooned by Joe Lycett and a denizen of one of the US Birminghams

Though “most of the Brummies in the media aren’t here any more”, Lycett said he loves to promote his birthplace and home whenever he can, including making his Bafta-winning Channel 4 entertainment show *Late Night Lycett* in the city. “There’s something magical about this city which nobody talks about. We don’t shout about ourselves.”

Silk revealed how she had the initial idea for the series: “I can’t be the only one who has accidentally almost booked a table for two in Birmingham, Alabama. I’ve always been interested in that city and thought there might be something in a programme comparing us and them. I took it to Steve Gowans from North One, who realised there were all these other Birmingham’s.”

She then sought Lycett’s involvement and he came up with the “genius twist” of a pact between the towns and cities. He explained: “I wanted a formal linking of them all and I love the pomp of an official document. You know when you see signs in cities naming the others they are twinned with? I wanted the sign ‘Birmingham, friends with Birmingham, Birmingham, Birmingham’ and so on. That’s funny to me.”

Lycett got a local official in each Birmingham to sign the friendship agreement, backed by the Lord Mayor of Birmingham in the UK. His mission culminated back home with an International Day of Birmingham on 24 September last year, the first of what is hoped will be an annual event. A parade and civic reception included local luminaries Joan Armatrading and Black Sabbath’s Tony Iommi.

The crowd enjoyed a collective chant of “Alright, bab”, a common friendly greeting, before the hoisting of



Lycett with Mr Egg at the RTS Midlands premiere

Vivienne Bailey

the United States of Birmingham (USB) flag, designed by Lycett, with buglers playing the USB fanfare. The RTS screening began with the sold-out audience standing for the jaunty music performed by ceremonial bugler Antonio Socci, who composed the anthem.

Lycett says he finds guns terrifying, so was disconcerted in the first

‘WE’RE LIVING
IN DIVISIVE
TIMES BUT THIS
SHOWS THAT
PEOPLE ARE
WONDERFUL’

episode to find himself a natural while firing at a range. In Birmingham, Pennsylvania, he met some of the descendants of William Brinton, a Quaker who emigrated from Birmingham UK to the US in the 17th century

and whose relatives include Taylor Swift as well as Richard Nixon.

His encounters with locals are funny but Lycett does not ridicule them. As event host Nikki Bedi said: “You did it with such respect, when it would have been easy to cock a snook.”

Lycett replied: “There’s no need to be sneery. It’s a celebration and I was genuinely excited to meet these people. At first, many of the Birmingham’s were suspicious of us and thought it might be a Sacha Baron Cohen-style hoax. But then we were really touched by the way they welcomed us.”

He explained that they deliberately avoided discussing politics with the Americans because it would have felt too dated by the time of transmission. “We never asked anyone who they voted for. Most of them almost certainly voted for Trump but they were all lovely.”

Along the way, Lycett found interesting connections between the Birmingham’s. At the RTS event, the normally flamboyant comedian wore a plain white T-shirt, emblazoned with the words Birmingham Tap Water. He explained: “What I didn’t expect was to find a weird link that so many of the Birmingham’s are proud of their tap water in the same way that we are.”

Lycett picked out his favourite and least favourite US places called Birmingham. He told the RTS: “I was surprised to find that Birmingham, Michigan, is posh. It’s a cross between LA and Dubai – really swish, with sports cars everywhere. All the other Birmingham’s were quite rough round the edges, like ours. Michigan was probably our least favourite because it was soulless.

“Our favourite was a suburb of Toledo in Ohio, full of Hungarians. There’s a hot dog restaurant that served Bloody Mary cocktails with a sausage in it instead of celery. Weirdly, there’s a Mondelez plant there that makes biscuits for the Cadbury’s chocolate produced in Birmingham.”

Lycett concluded: “I am so, so proud of this series. Apart from one day, when Nicola had me pouring molten metal at an actual furnace on a really hot day in August, it was genuinely a joy to make. I am thrilled with it.” ■

Report by Roz Laws. The RTS Midlands premiere was held at the Midlands Arts Centre in Birmingham on 1 April. It was hosted by Nikki Bedi and produced by Jayne Rae.

Sky



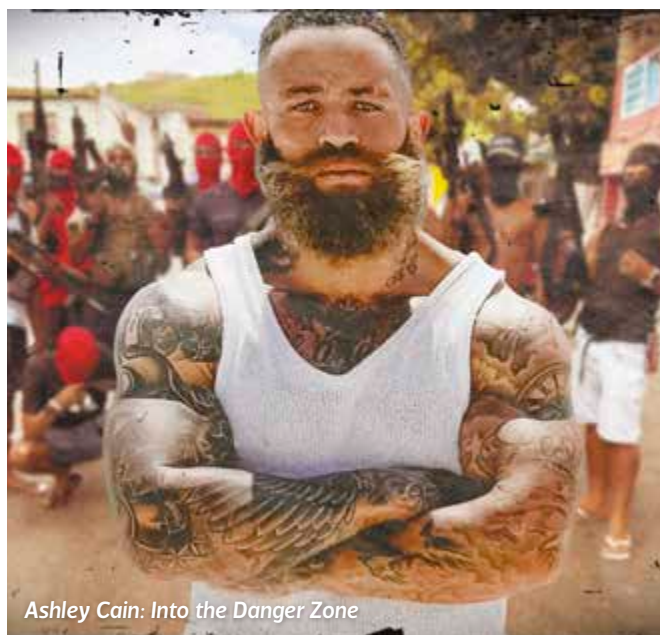
Lycett makes a pact with Kentucky mayor Rita Dotson

Making friends with drug dealers, gangsters and poachers for his new BBC documentary series sounds like a risky strategy for Ashley Cain. But the former Coventry City footballer and TV reality star told the RTS Midlands premiere of *Into the Danger Zone*: “I don’t support criminality but I do support humanity.”

Cain said he had travelled to some of the most hostile places in the world to meet violent offenders in a bid to understand, with no judgement, how the young men found themselves in these deadly situations.

He earned people’s trust to infiltrate the closed worlds of favelas in Brazil, jails in the Philippines and cartels in Colombia, and befriend rhino horn poachers in South Africa and mercenaries in Marseilles. He has stayed in touch with some, even getting a Happy New Year text from Pablo Escobar’s son.

Cain told the RTS: “I wanted to listen to these men with an open mind, to be a voice for people who feel like they’re not heard and excluded from society. I connected with them on a human level. A lot of them do incredibly bad things, but why? They might not be bad people. Where there are no



Ashley Cain: *Into the Danger Zone*

BBC

Tough times in bad lands

RTS Midlands Ex-footballer Ashley Cain tells why he braved the world’s danger zones for a BBC Three series. **Roz Laws** reports

opportunities and poverty, they do what they need to in order to survive.

“I could easily have turned to a life of crime where I grew up. I had to ask myself:

if my kids were hungry, would I do what they do to put food in my sons’ mouths? Maybe.”

Cain’s two young sons – Aliyas, 15 months, and five-month-old Atlas – were in the audience at the event. He missed Atlas’s arrival as he was born early while he was filming *Into the Danger Zone*. His daughter, Azaylia, died from leukaemia in 2021 aged eight months, which is why he felt especially connected to a grieving mother he met in Rio de Janeiro.

“She, like me, had lost a child. Her son was murdered by the militia and his body was burned and returned to her as a bag of bones. It cut

deep.” In the first episode of the BBC Three six-parter, Cain has tears in his eyes as he hugs her, saying: “My heart really hurts for you.”

Also at the premiere to support Cain were some of his well-known friends, including Calum Best (son of George), rugby union player Harry Thacker and *SAS: Who Dares Wins* chief instructor Billy Billingham (Cain reached the final of the Channel 4 celebrity series in 2022).

Cain makes a striking impression with luxuriant beard and tattoos on bulging muscles, which he has put to use raising money in memory of Azaylia in extraordinary physical challenges, including an Ultraman 900-mile run, 925-mile cycle and 950-mile kayak sea crossing.

But *Into the Danger Zone* has been another challenge altogether, not least because it was his first attempt at making a documentary with his production company, House of Panthera, in association with True North.

“I didn’t know what I was doing,” he said. “I just had to be myself and have trust in the great people around me. We were in the trenches, with only 10 days to make each episode, and I was scared about what was going to happen. But we got it done despite the odds.”

BBC commissioning editor Nasfim Haque introduced the first episode at the RTS Midlands event and called it a “modern, stylish and gripping series”, adding: “Ashley is what BBC Three is about – a new talent giving us a new perspective.” ■

The premiere of *Into the Danger Zone* was held at the Mockingbird Cinema in Birmingham on 24 March. It was hosted by radio presenter Rakeem Omar and produced by Jayne Rae.



Ashley Cain at the RTS event

Vivienne Bailey

Having so far uncovered the secrets of whales, elephants and octopuses, National Geographic has turned the camera towards a natural history staple – the penguin – for its latest series.

The opening episode of *Secrets of the Penguins* had its UK premiere in front of a packed RTS audience at Bristol's Watershed cinema, and was followed by a Q&A.

Executive producer Martin Williams explained how he used the franchise's existing template to craft its fourth instalment: "[The *Secrets of the Penguins* franchise] is about blue-chip photography, it's about unravelling revelations about the animals involved, and also taking the viewer on a journey at the character level.

"The other secret sauce in this franchise is bringing our human characters into the films themselves," added Williams, who founded Tale-smith, which made *Secrets of the Penguins*.

The human character in question is Bertie Gregory, an award-winning wildlife cinematographer who spent weeks living alongside and filming the emperor penguins of Antarctica for the opening episode.

"We often had them coming through camp to see who these weird aliens were," Gregory said. "You really get to know them."

Gregory leads the viewer through the stories of these penguins, but said of his role: "I feel kind of embarrassed that wildlife TV presenters always get way too much credit." He went on to praise the work of his fellow crew members, with a special shout-out for polar safety advisor Scott Webster.

The work of scientists, identifying new behaviours and fresh narratives, was also



Secrets of the Penguins

National Geographic

P-P-Pick up a human

West of England Why are these weird aliens filming us, wondered the stars of a new wildlife series. **Seraphina Allard-Bridge** reports

crucial to the series. "It was a bit of a jigsaw, trying to work out how these stories fitted together," said Williams, "but the scientists were at the heart of making those decisions and trying to tell a story that hadn't been told before."

One such story was seen by millions over a year before the show's release, as a standout moment of filming was put out on National Geographic socials. The clip showed emperor penguins jumping off a 50-foot cliff – a behaviour that had never been filmed before.

Gregory explained the clip's origin: "As soon as we located that group of chicks, I wanted to make sure we had absolutely no influence on whether they jumped or not, so I spent a lot of time downwind, a couple of hundred metres away... just

hovering, just watching."

Once he had confirmed that this was natural behaviour, Gregory began filming.

When the footage made it back to the National Geographic offices, the decision was made to put it on social media. Gregory recalled the phrase that was used: "This is gonna break the internet!" The footage in the series could not have been captured without advances in technology. The cliff jump was filmed entirely using drones, as Gregory explained: "There was no way of us getting any closer to film with a traditional camera."

The cameras being used also had to survive temperatures as low as -47°C . "[Kit company] Films@59 did a bunch of freezer tests," said Gregory. "They basically tried to break the equipment."

The series does not shy

away from climate and environmental breakdown. Williams explained that including this messaging was a no-brainer: "I don't think you can tell many natural history stories without reporting on the truth."

"The most moving thing with the emperor penguins is that there aren't many animals in the world whose sole threat is climate change," said Gregory. "Most emperor penguins will never see a human, so most of them will never see the cause of their greatest threat."

He added: "It's important that we get people to care about [the natural world]." ■

The RTS West of England event, in association with Wildscreen, was held on 8 April at the Watershed cinema in Bristol. Secrets of the Penguins is on the National Geographic channel and Disney+.

Former Controller of BBC Wales Menna Richards received the Lifetime Achievement award in recognition of her exceptional contribution to the Welsh television industry at the RTS Cymru Wales Awards in Cardiff last month.

She received the award from Director of BBC Cymru Wales Rhuanedd Richards and *Doctor Who* showrunner Russell T Davies.

RTS Cymru Wales Chair Edward Russell said: "This year, we commemorated the 20th anniversary of *Doctor Who* coming from Wales with a special Lifetime Achievement award for the former controller of BBC Wales, Menna Richards, one of the key players in orchestrating the show's success back in 2005 and beyond."

S4C crime drama *Cleddau*, which stars Elen Rhys and Richard Harrington as police colleagues and former lovers, was named best drama. The six-part series, produced by BlackLight TV and written by Catherine Tregenna, was also made in English, streaming on BBC iPlayer as *The One That Got Away*.

Gwyneth Keyworth took home the Drama Performance award for her spell-binding portrayal of a broken single mother in the final episode of *Lost Boys & Fairies*, Duck Soup Films'



Best Drama: *Cleddau* stars Elen Rhys and Richard Harrington

S4C

Lovely, dark and deep

RTS Cymru Wales From the Tardis to a grubby takeaway, a Cardiff ceremony celebrated Wales at its very best. **Matthew Bell** reports

series for BBC One. BBC Three animated series *The Golden Cobra*, set in an awful Ebbw Vale takeaway, was named best comedy.

BBC Wales film *Strike! The Women Who Fought Back*, the story of six women from South Wales who helped sustain the 1984 miners' strike, won the Factual Documentary award for Frank Films.

Angharad Mair, the presenter of S4C Welsh-language magazine programme *Heno*, and stand-up comic Leroy Brito hosted the awards at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama in Cardiff.

At the ceremony, RTS Cymru Wales presented its Student Television Awards, with the University of South Wales notching up seven

wins. Bangor University, Screen Alliance Wales and Cardiff University also won awards.

Russell T Davies said: "By including industry, students, undergraduates and post-graduates in these awards, it makes it the most lively, the most important and the best awards ceremony of all – well done!" ■



Celf Calon

Menna Richards: Lifetime Achievement

RTS Cymru Wales Television Awards winners

Industry Awards

Lifetime Achievement - Menna Richards

Drama - *Cleddau* - BlackLight Television for S4C

Drama Performance - Gwyneth Keyworth, *Lost Boys & Fairies* - Duck Soup Films for BBC One

Comedy - *The Golden Cobra* - Beastly Media/BBC Studios for BBC Three

Factual Documentary - *Strike! The Women Who Fought Back* - Frank Films for BBC One Wales

Factual Entertainment - *Cyfrinachau'r Llyfrgell* - Slam Media for S4C

Children's - *Itopia* - Boom Plant for S4C

News and Current Affairs - *Item* - Inside Wales' Reading Crisis - ITN for ITV News

News and Current Affairs - *Series - Y Byd ar Bedwar: Y Daith i Rwanda* - ITV Cymru Wales for S4C

Sports Documentary - *Welcome to Wrexham* - Neo Studios for Boardwalk Pictures/Disney+/FX

Presenter of the Year - Kristoffer Hughes, *Marw gyda Kris* - Ffilmiau Twm Twm for S4C

Rising Star - Jack Carey

Digital - *Colli Dy Dafod* - Boom Social for S4C Hansh

Multiskilled Journalist or Producer - Nick Hartley, *Inseparable Sisters* - BBC One Wales

Production Manager - Jon Williams - BlackLight Television

Student Undergraduate Awards

Animation - *The Nerve Herd* - University of South Wales

Drama - *I Am Alive* -

University of South Wales

Entertainment and Comedy Drama - *Tape 15* - Bangor University

Factual: Short Form - *Back to Bute* - Screen Alliance Wales

Craft Skills: Camera - *Cân Y Glöwr* - University of South Wales

Student Postgraduate Awards

Drama - *The Box* - University of South Wales

Entertainment and Comedy Drama - *Patient* - University of South Wales

Factual: Long Form - *Begin Again* - Cardiff University

Factual Short Form - *Rosemary* - University of South Wales

Craft Skills: Sound - *Nibbling of the Night* - University of South Wales

Mark Rylance received the On-screen Talent: Performance award for his portrayal of Henry VIII's right-hand man Thomas Cromwell in *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light* at the RTS West of England Awards late last month.

The judges commended Rylance for "a standout, composed and stunning performance" in the BBC One drama, conveying "complex internal emotions while maintaining Cromwell's stoic exterior".

Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light, the second and concluding series adapted from Hilary Mantel's Cromwell novels, was largely filmed on location in the west country.

BBC Three comedy drama *Boarders*, made by Studio Lambert and shot in Bristol, took home the Scripted award.

The heartwarming *Billy & Molly: An Otter Love Story*, made by Bristol-based Silverback Films for National Geographic and Disney+, won two trophies: best Documentary and Editing for Sam Rogers. The film, set in Shetland, tells the story of an unlikely friendship between a man and a wild otter.

Johnny Rolt, who worked as a cinematographer on *Billy & Molly*, won the Flying Futures award for emerging talent behind the camera.



On-screen Talent: Performance: Mark Rylance beat co-star Damian Lewis after both were nominated for *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light*

BBC

Rylance usurps the King

RTS West of England Bristol Old Vic applauded the talent behind the region's standout dramas and documentaries. **Matthew Bell** reports

In a strong Natural History category, BBC Studios Natural History Unit triumphed with *Mammals*. Narrated by Sir David Attenborough, the six-part BBC One series explores the world of mammals, from the tiny terrestrial Etruscan shrew to the blue whale.

Netflix documentary *Living with Leopards*, which was made by Wild Space Productions in association with Freeborne Media, won two craft awards: Director for Alex Parkinson

and Grading for Dan Gill. Wall to Wall's moving three-part series for BBC Two, *D-Day: The Unheard Tapes*, won the Factual award, while *George Clarke's Adventures in Americana* triumphed in the Factual Entertainment and Features category.

In the News categories, ITV News West Country's Robert Murphy was named best News Journalist. *Rugby on Trial*, made by BBC Local Longform Investigations, won the News

or Current Affairs Story award for its report into whether enough has been done to protect players from repeated knocks to the head.

The awards ceremony at Bristol Old Vic was hosted by comedian Stuart Goldsmith.

RTS West of England Chair Rachel Drummond-Hay said: "As a region, we should be hugely proud of the calibre of talent and strength of programming demonstrated in this year's awards." ■



Jon Craig

Mark Rylance collects his award in Bristol

RTS West of England Television Awards winners

Scripted-*Boarders*-Studio Lambert for BBC Three

Natural History-*Mammals* BBC Studios Natural History Unit with BBC America, ZDF, Youku and France Télévisions for BBC One

Documentary-*Billy & Molly: An Otter Love Story*-Silverback Films for National Geographic/Disney+

Factual-*D-Day: The Unheard Tapes* Wall to Wall for BBC Two

Factual Entertainment and Features-*George Clarke's Adventures in Americana*-Plum Pictures for Channel 4

On-screen Talent-*Ellie Barker*, ITV News West Country

On-screen Talent: Performance Mark Rylance, *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light*-Playground/Company Pictures for BBC One

Flying Futures-*Johnny Rolt*, Silverback Films

News or Current Affairs Journalist Robert Murphy, ITV News West Country

News or Current Affairs Story *Rugby on Trial*-BBC Local Longform Investigations for BBC One

Children's-*Andy's Global Adventures* BBC Studios Natural History Unit for CBeebies

Director-*Alex Parkinson*, *Living with Leopards*-Wild Space Productions in association with Freeborne Media for Netflix

Director (Scripted)-*Chloë Wicks*, *True-love*-Clerkenwell Films for Channel 4

Composer-*Morgan Kibby*, *Queens*

Wildstar Films for National Geographic and Disney+

Cinematography-*John Lynch*, *Rivals* Happy Prince for Disney+

Editing-*Sam Rogers*, *Billy & Molly: An Otter Love Story*-Silverback Films for National Geographic and Disney+

Grading-*Dan Gill*, *Living with Leopards* Picture Shop for Wild Space Productions with Freeborne Media for Netflix

Production Management-*Rachel Drummond-Hay*, *Caitlin Lees-Massey*, *Jack Hinchey* and *Charis Munday*, *Sign2Win*-Drummer TV for BSL Zone

Sound-*Graham Wild*, *Marc Anderson*, *Tom Mercer* and *Rory Joseph*, *Earthsounds*-Wounded Buffalo Sound Studios for Offspring Films (Apple TV+)

VFX and Digital Creativity-*VFX team*, *Solar System*-Lux Aeterna VFX for BBC Studios Science (BBC Two)

Sally Taylor received a special award for Services to Broadcasting at the RTS Southern Television Awards in Southampton. As the anchor of regional news magazine *BBC South Today* for almost 40 years, Taylor covered 10 general elections, reported from war-torn Bosnia and broadcast live from Antarctica. She retired from the show in March.

The BBC also won three awards from the news categories: Special Features Journalist for Ben Moore from BBC South East Investigations; Industry Newcomer for Clodagh Stenson from BBC South Investigations; and Regional TV Journalist for Katharine Da Costa from *BBC South Today*.

ITV News Meridian won the award for Strand within a News or Magazine Programme for its review of 40 years of coverage of the NHS blood infection scandal. The best Regional News Magazine Programme award went to *ITV News Meridian East*.

The Jury: Murder Trial, made for Channel 4 by the Brighton-based ScreenDog Productions, was named best Factual Series at the ceremony. The much-praised four-part series shone a light on Britain's jury system by



Sally Taylor accepted the Services to Broadcasting special award

BBC

BBC South Today host honoured

Stephanie Farmer reports from the Utilita Bowl, which hosted the joint Industry and Student awards

recreating a real murder trial from court transcripts.

The Single Documentary award was won by Hove's

Chalk Productions for an unflinching portrayal of the life of disabled artist Alison Lapper in the BBC One film

In My Own Words: Alison Lapper.

The ceremony at the Hilton Utilita Bowl, Southampton, was hosted by *BBC South Today* presenter David Allard and *ITV News Meridian* anchor Sangeeta Bhabra.

University for the Creative Arts took home two Student Awards: Drama for the comic film *The Extraordinary Marvel of Francesco Linguine* and Factual: Short-Form for *Tales of Exile*, a documentary about exiled Palestinians in Jordan.

The other three principal awards were shared by Arts University Bournemouth (Animation), Bournemouth University (Factual: Long-Form) and University of Surrey (Entertainment and Comedy Drama).

Southampton Solent University received a special award for Outstanding Technical Achievement for *Nothing But Net!*. RTS Southern Chair Stuart Ray said: "The judges were incredibly impressed by the complexity and professionalism of this entry, a live five-hour broadcast with content equivalent to a major broadcaster."

The awards ceremony was filmed and live-streamed by students from Southampton Solent University, led by senior lecturer and Southern committee member Kate O'Driscoll. ■

Student animation winner: *Why Won't Anyone Eat Me?*



RTS Southern Television Awards winners

Industry Categories

- **Services to Broadcasting** - Sally Taylor
- **Single Documentary** - *In My Own Words: Alison Lapper* - Chalk Productions for BBC One
- **Factual Series** - *The Jury: Murder Trial* - ScreenDog Productions for Channel 4
- **Factual Entertainment Series** - *The Makers* - Terrific Television for Sky Kids
- **Regional News Magazine Programme** - *ITV News Meridian East*
- **Strand within a News or Magazine Programme** - *Blood Scandal* - ITV News Meridian
- **Regional Television Journalist** - Katharine Da Costa, BBC South Today
- **Special Features Journalist** - Ben Moore, BBC South East Investigations

■ **Industry Newcomer** - Clodagh Stenson, BBC South Investigations

■ **Short Form Content** - *The Place Makers* - Ordnance Survey

■ **Camerawork** - Joshua Bosley

■ **Post-production** - Maria Veatriki Lykouri, Woodcut Media

Student Categories

■ **Animation** - *Why Won't Anyone Eat Me?* - Arts University Bournemouth

■ **Drama** - *The Extraordinary Marvel of Francesco Linguine* - University for the Creative Arts

■ **Entertainment and Comedy Drama** - *UnCancelled* - University of Surrey

■ **Factual: Long Form** - *Perspective ADHD* - Bournemouth University

■ **Factual: Short Form** - *Tales of Exile* - University for the Creative Arts

■ **Special Award for Outstanding Technical Achievement** - *Nothing But Net!* - Southampton Solent University

Outgoing TG4 Director General (Ard-Stiúrthóir) Alan Esslemont was presented with the Outstanding Contribution award at the RTS Republic of Ireland Gradaim/Awards.

Scotland-born Esslemont left the Irish-language channel in April, having served nearly nine years in the top role. Paying tribute, RTS Ireland Chair Agnes Cogan said: "Alan's contribution to the Irish and international television scene has been extraordinary in its scope, ambition and achievement."

"TG4, under his stewardship, is undeniably a major player in media and film, constantly expanding and innovating."

TG4 also won the Scripted award for the rural crime drama *Crá*, the first Irish-language programme to win a primetime slot on BBC Northern Ireland, and the Live Sport Coverage prize for *Rugbaí Beo: Munster v Leinster, Christmas Interpro*.

A new Audience Choice award for the favourite TV show of 2024, voted for by the general public, went to RTÉ Storyland comedy *Did You Read About Erskine Fogarty?* The adaptation of a short story by Irish artist and author Blindboy Boatclub stars Robert Sheehan as a troubled man dragging a fridge through Limerick to prove that he's a big shot.



Audience Choice: *Did You Read About Erskine Fogarty?*

RTÉ

A cool winner for RTÉ

Republic of Ireland A glittering event at the Guinness Storehouse in Dublin took in comedy, crime and sport. **Matthew Bell** reports

Dublin actor and filmmaker Cal O'Driscoll – star of Virgin Media comedy-horror series *Video Nasty* – took home the Breakthrough Talent award. He also recently appeared in Ariane Labeled's debut feature film, *September Says*.

RTÉ enjoyed a successful evening at the ceremony, which was presented by Muireann O'Connell and Tommy Bowe, the hosts of Virgin Media One breakfast show *Ireland AM*. Ireland's

public broadcaster scooped seven awards, including three Factual prizes, for *Stardust: Truth* (Series), *Jackie & Coco* (Single) and *Birdsong* (Specialist).

It also took home the Animation and Children's programming award for *What Daire Did Next*, Entertainment (*Kabin Crew's Christmas Special*), Current Affairs (*RTÉ Investigates: Inside the Protests*) and Sport Documentary (*Girls in Green*).

Sky Ireland was named

News Broadcaster of the Year and Virgin Media Television won the Factual Entertainment category with *Gogglebox Ireland*.

The awards were held at the Guinness Storehouse, Dublin, in late March and hosted by Virgin Media Television with support from Screen Ireland, Ireland's media regulator Coimisiún na Meán and Screen Producers Ireland, along with broadcasters RTÉ, TG4 and Sky Ireland. ■



Brian McEvoy

Alan Esslemont: Outstanding Contribution

RTS Republic of Ireland Television Awards winners

- Outstanding Contribution** - Alan Esslemont
- Audience Choice** - *Did You Read About Erskine Fogarty?* - Connla's Well for RTÉ
- Breakthrough Talent** - Cal O'Driscoll
- Scripted** - *Crá* - Fíbhí Media and Zoogon for TG4
- Entertainment** - *Kabin Crew's Christmas Special* - 84/Ochtó4 Productions for RTÉ
- Factual Entertainment** - *Gogglebox Ireland* - Kite Entertainment for Virgin Media Television

- Factual Series** - *Stardust: Truth* - RTÉ
- Factual Single** - *Jackie & Coco* - Atom Films for RTÉ
- Specialist Factual** - *Birdsong* - True Films for RTÉ
- News Broadcaster of the Year** - Sky Ireland
- Current Affairs** - *RTÉ Investigates: Inside the Protests* - RTÉ
- Sport Documentary** - *Girls In Green* - RTÉ
- Live Sport Coverage** - *Rugbaí Beo: Munster v Leinster, Christmas Interpro* - IRIS Productions for TG4
- Animation and Children's** - *What Daire Did Next* - Tyrone Productions for RTÉ

RTS CENTRE **STUDENT AWARDS**

RTS Scotland *Oj Tato* was one of three films to notch up doubles at the RTS Scotland Student Awards at Saint Luke's in Glasgow, winning the Factual: Short Form category and Craft: Editing prize for Screen Academy Scotland (Edinburgh Napier University) student Eva Magdić Govedarica.

The Factual: Long Form award went to the University of Stirling's *Sub Zero Salvation*, with Antoaneta Ninovska taking home the Craft: Editing award for her work on the film. University of the West of Scotland film *Gas & Electricity* scooped the Drama award, with William Duguid Cox winning the Craft: Camerawork trophy.

RTS Scotland Chair Stephen O'Donnell told the nominees and winners: "We hope you've enjoyed an early taster of the excitement that comes with an awards night. I look forward to seeing you on stage collecting an Emmy very soon."



Oj Tato: Factual: Short Form and Craft: Editing winner

Jamie Simpson

Glasgow today, an Emmy next?

STV entertainment reporter Laura Boyd, who presented the awards for the fifth time, said: "It is one of my favourite events of the year. It's a joy to host and I'm thrilled to be

part of the students' much-deserved celebrations."

All the nominated films will be available on streaming service STV Player.

Matthew Bell

RTS Scotland Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *Midnight at Mickey's* Vin Wolff, Megan Emmie Daly and Erin Williamson, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Drama - *Gas & Electricity* Daniel Kelly, Grace Bisland, William Duguid Cox, Kelly Halpin, Lewis Robertson and Skye Morrison, University of the West of Scotland

Entertainment and Comedy

Drama - *Taraspotting* Leora Soibelman, Audrey Renner, Momo Elliot and Shira David, University of Edinburgh

Factual: Long Form - *Sub Zero Salvation* Ethan Dear, Alex Lichtenauer, Meena Annamali, Ronja Putensen and Antoaneta Ninovska, University of Stirling

Factual: Short Form - *Oj Tato* Natalia Baczynski, Beth Lindsay, Eva Magdić Govedarica and Jennifer Morrison, Screen Academy Scotland (Edinburgh Napier University)

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

Craft Skills: Camerawork *Gas & Electricity* and *Lamia* William Duguid Cox, University of the West of Scotland

Craft Skills: Editing - *Oj Tato* Eva Magdić Govedarica, Screen Academy Scotland (ENU)

Craft Skills: Production Design - *Popper* Juno Glover, Screen Academy Scotland (ENU)

Craft Skills: Sound - *Sub Zero Salvation* Antoaneta Ninovska, University of Stirling

Hey presto! London sprinkles magic dust

RTS London The trophies were shared around the capital at this year's RTS London Student Television Awards, held at the Magic Circle.

The London College of Communication (University of the Arts London) performed best, picking up three awards. The Factual: Short Form winner, *Outsiders*, was praised by the judges for its camerawork and "gentle and haunting soundtrack".

The London College of Communication also won two Craft awards: Editing for Aivaras Gedvilas on *The*

London I Saw, which was "expertly edited ensuring a high tempo of pace" and Sound for Tom Fredrickson and Martha Bryant on *Chalk*, which boasted "a cleverly designed soundscape".

RTS London Chair Phil Barnes said: "Excitement filled the air during this year's awards, presented by up-and-coming magician Chris Dodd. The quality of the submissions was impressive, and it was reassuring to witness that the students entering the industry were well-prepared."

Matthew Bell



Outsiders: Factual: Short Form winners

RTS/John Stone

RTS London Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *Anomaly* Artürs Vobjlkovs, Middlesex University

Drama - *Out Like a Lamb* Fern Jessop and Morgan Quashie, Central Film School

Entertainment and Comedy Drama *Split Ends* Barrett Loades, Lada Kopytova, Isla Ley and Mathilda Kenny, University of Westminster

Factual: Long Form - *The Story of Kween Deekay: Struggle into Symphony* Martha Bryant, Charlotte Lang, Sophie Sutcliffe and Blaire Yeonjae Lee, Goldsmiths, University of London

Factual: Short Form - *Outsiders*

Sharleen Sarzuelo Dydland, Lyam Dara, Sierra Fofana, Marcó Chan and Tom Fowles, London College of Communication (UAL)

Craft Skills: Camerawork *Hoard* Louis Grammond, University of Westminster

Craft Skills: Editing - *The London I Saw* Aivaras Gedvilas, London College of Communication (UAL)

Craft Skills: Production Design *Midnight Crisis* Dafne Sanchez, Middlesex University

Craft Skills: Sound - *Chalk* Tom Fredrickson and Martha Bryant, London College of Communication (UAL)

Craft Skills: Writing - *A Bigger Bear* Isaac Morgans, Middlesex University

Queen's gambit pays off

Northern Ireland

Queen's University Belfast took home a bumper five awards from the RTS Northern Ireland Student Awards.

The Drama prize went to *Last Fare*, which, said the judges, had "strong storytelling with an intriguing narrative and a well-crafted script". *Love From*, boasting "high production values", won the Entertainment and Comedy Drama category.

The "beautifully and compellingly told" *Danseur*, which featured "wonderful dance sequences and choreography", was named best Factual: Short Form film, while the Long Form award went to *The Ball's in Their Court*.

Queen's University Belfast also won a Craft Production



Queen's University Belfast: winning film-makers

Justin Kernaghan

award for *That's News to Me*.

Breaking the Queen's stranglehold over the principal awards, Alisa Kamari took home the Animation prize with *Shellbound*.

A second Craft Production award went to Ulster University Belfast students for *The LEGO Man*. Christopher McSherry from Ulster University, Derry-Londonderry, received the Craft Camera-work prize for *U of A*, which he shot entirely on an iPhone.

The event, held at Belfast's Black Box, was hosted by radio producer/presenter Caoimhe Ní Chathail. Giving the Joe McKinney Memorial

Keynote Speech, UTV reporter Jordan Moore said: "These awards celebrate the wealth of young talent emerging from our colleges,

providing our students with an amazing opportunity to have their talent celebrated by industry professionals."

Matthew Bell

RTS Northern Ireland Student Television Awards winners

Animation-Shellbound-Alisa Kamari, Ulster University, Belfast

Drama-Last Fare-Annabel Harkness, Sam Press, Seán McGlone, Danny Liken, Stephen Linkens, Holly Jenkinson, Brendan Robinson and Lucy Carter-Ashmore, Queen's University Belfast

Entertainment and Comedy Drama Love From-Oliver Sadler, Tom Bewley, Rachel McAllister, Sarah McComb, Sian Alexander, Sean Conroy and Leah Watters, Queen's University Belfast

Factual: Long Form-The Ball's in Their Court-Orla Dunne, Therese

Farren and Joseph Hinchcliffe, Queen's University Belfast

Factual: Short Form-Danseur Susie Loane, Amy Lonergan, David King, Eimear Reavey and DaiQing Yongcua, Queen's University Belfast

Craft Skills: Camerawork-U of A Christopher McSherry, Ulster University, Derry-Londonderry

Craft Skills: Production-That's News to Me-Arwen Fegan, Matthew Wilson, Georgia McPoland, Michaela Burke and Matthew Martin, Queen's University Belfast

Craft Skills: Production-The LEGO Man-Jonathan Elder, Conor Martin, Gareth Walsh, Ruairi McGonnell and Summer Long, Ulster University, Belfast

Hometown glory for 'brilliant' Salford trio

RTS North West

University of Salford took home three of the five main prizes from Salford's MediaCity at the RTS North West Student Television Awards.

Entertainment and Comedy Drama winner *Bricked Up*, said the judges, was "reminiscent of a Guy Ritchie caper, with a brilliant nod to the *Trainspotting* lifestyle", while best Drama *Trapped* had a "compelling story" and was "excellently acted".

Salford's Factual: Short

Form winner, *Grindadráp*, tackled a controversial subject – pilot whale-hunting in the Faroe Islands – with balance.

Manchester Metropolitan University's "Wes Anderson-esque" *ESC* from "an exceptionally strong field".

The Factual: Long Form award was presented to University of Central Lancashire for *Woodlands Animal Rescue*, a film that "felt like a piece of primetime TV".

Matthew Bell



ESC: Animation award winner

MMU

RTS North West Student Television Awards winners

Animation-ESC-Olivia Timms, Pam Simoes Gomez and Osian Jones, Manchester Metropolitan University (SODA)

Drama-Trapped-Glodi Kuba-Kuba, Daniel Herranz-Carr, Archie Barker, Conor Gallagher and Jake Perret, University of Salford

Entertainment and Comedy Drama Bricked Up-Max James Walker, Xavier Sonski, Tom Carrick, Emily Lunson, Aaron Lee, Diana-Maria Mihailescu and Jeannette McNichol, University of Salford

Factual: Long Form-Woodlands Animal Rescue-Grace Nixon,

University of Central Lancashire

Factual: Short Form-Grindadráp Harry Warner, University of Salford

Craft Skills: Camerawork-The Sea Harriet Franks, University of Salford

Craft Skills: Editing-Two Worlds Apart-Francis Kelly, University of Salford

Craft Skills: Production Design Marla-Eleanor O'Donoghue, Josh Hedley and Molly Baynham, University of Salford

Craft Skills: Sound-Coeden Meinir Jared Foakes and Sam Rogers, University of Salford

Craft Skills: Writing-Are You Home for Christmas?-Katie Brown, Manchester Film School, UCEN

RTS
Technology

The RTS Technology Centre teamed up with the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) at Ravensbourne University to discuss how mid-career professionals in the media industry can negotiate rapid technological shifts.

The event brought together industry leaders to share insights on the evolving landscape of broadcast technology.

Jerome Champetier from MediaKind explained the challenges of transitioning from traditional hardware to software-based workflows.

LiveWyer founder David O'Dwyer addressed misconceptions about cloud-native media infrastructure, offering advice on how to overcome barriers and find reliable learning resources.

A session featuring consultant Melissa Carr, Caspian One Recruitment's Phil Hodgetts, Sky Studios' Emily Bergun and Alex Redfern (Chief Technology Officer at EVS



The Ravensbourne University event

Mark Couto

Time to face the future

Broadcast Equipment) delved into the results of a pre-event LinkedIn survey.

This highlighted a significant level of uncertainty about the future direction of the industry and a lack of clarity on the skills needed for career advancement.

IT media engineer and RTS Technology committee member Mark Couto said: "The event underscored the pressing need for ongoing learning and adaptation in our industry. It highlighted the shared challenges we face and the importance of community

and collaboration in overcoming them. The questions raised about cloud migration and specialised learning resonated deeply with attendees, sparking lively discussions."

A follow-up workshop will be held on 26 June at Buckinghamshire New University.



20-20 vision at mighty YouTube

Congratulations to YouTube on celebrating the 20th anniversary of its launch last month. As the brilliant media forecaster Evan Shapiro never tires of reminding us, the video-sharing platform's popularity is staggering.

Here are a few statistics to take your breath away: since YouTube made its 2005 debut, 20bn videos have been uploaded to the service. Each day, more than 20m videos are posted on YouTube. And Goldman Sachs has valued the creator economy at \$250bn. In the

UK alone, it is estimated that this supports the equivalent of more than 45,000 full-time jobs.

Warm wishes for White Lotus 4

Monday evenings aren't the same without our weekly fix of series three of *The White Lotus*. For the Upside's money, it kept on improving as events reached their bloody denouement.

Thankfully, a fourth *White Lotus* series has been greenlit, but the location is still to be decided and we may have to wait until early 2027 for its arrival.

There is speculation that – following Hawaii, Sicily and Thailand – the show could once again check in somewhere in Europe, provided it's a sun-soaked

destination. Showrunner Mike White has said that he hates the cold.

Prime offers ballet ... and belly laughs

Two new shows on Prime Video are generating a buzz. *Étoile*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino and Dan Palladino, is a high-octane, behind-the-scenes saga of backbiting and power plays at world-renowned ballet companies in New York and Paris.

This series is likely to appeal to both dance fans and those new to this most graceful of arts.

A UK version of *LOL: Last One Laughing* has been a long time coming – more than 20 versions of the show have been made globally – but it has been worth the wait.

Jimmy Carr hosts as A-list comedians are holed up in a reality-TV-style house and attempt to keep a straight face as their fellow comics try to make them crack up.

A double dose of thrilling football

Finally, for Premier League fans – and who isn't? – Liverpool secured this year's title in truly epic style, thrashing Tottenham 5-1.

It was an extraordinary achievement for Arne Slot in his first year as manager.

Elsewhere, the women's game has given us some thrilling action. The Upside is counting down the days to 24 May when Arsenal take on reigning Women's Champions' League holders Barcelona in the final, following a superb 4-1 victory in Lyon. ■



RTS PATRONS

RTS Principal Patrons	BBC	Channel 4	ITV	Sky
------------------------------	-----	-----------	-----	-----

RTS International Patrons	Hearst Networks EMEA Apple TV+ HP With Intel Liberty Global NBCUniversal International Netflix	Paramount Sony Pictures Television Spencer Stuart The Walt Disney Company Warner Bros. Discovery YouTube
----------------------------------	---	---

RTS Major Patrons	Accenture All3Media Banijay UK Channel 5 Deloitte	Enders Analysis Fremantle GB News IMG Studios	ITN OC&C Prime Video Roku S4C	Sargent-Disc STV Group UKTV Virgin Media O2 YouView
--------------------------	---	--	---	---

RTS Patrons	Arqiva Elevate Talent Entertainment Partners	Searchlight PubMatic	Raidió Teilifís Éireann Sky Ireland	TG4 Virgin Media Ireland
--------------------	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------------------

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 Jennie Marwick-Evans Stephen O'Donnell Stuart Ray Cameron Roach Edward Russell</p> <p>SPECIALIST GROUP CHAIRS National Events Sarah Booth</p> <p>Education Graeme Thompson</p> <p>RTS Futures Alex Wootten</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>
-----------------------------	--	--	--	--

Turbocharging TV Talent

The RTS Mini MBA in Television & Streaming
Media is open for enrolment

Find out more



CPD accreditation in progress