

Television

May 2020



**Tanya Moodie on
life in lockdown**



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From the CEO



I am thrilled that the Society's online events have started in earnest, including a Q&A with Russell T Davies from RTS North West and "News in the new

norm" from RTS Thames Valley. Both attracted large and engaged audiences.

We now also have weekly events for our RTS Futures community and some exciting "In conversation with..." evenings, webinars and virtual screenings and discussions to come.

We have a bumper issue of *Television* for you this month to enjoy in lockdown. Our cover story is Caroline Frost's interview with the amazing Tanya Moodie, a new star of the BBC

Two sitcom *Motherland* and Break-through Award-winner at the RTS Programme Awards in March.

Talking of comedy, in these testing times the ability to kindle laughter is a precious gift. In the first of a new series, *Comfort Classic*, Matthew Bell examines the enduring appeal of that great sitcom *Only Fools and Horses*.

The BBC has stepped up to the plate with its Bitesize educational initiative. Maggie Brown describes how it is helping the nation's schoolchildren to carry on learning in the virtual classroom.

We will be doing everything we can to ensure that our own RTS bursary students are protected as much as possible from educational and career disruptions. Anne Dawson, who runs

the bursary scheme, has written a moving account of how young lives have been put on hold.

We also speak to the indefatigable Ben Frow, head of programmes at Channel 5, voted Channel of the Year at the RTS Programme Awards.

Finally, this month's expanded TV Diary is a candid account of how screenwriter and doctor Dan Sefton has returned to the front line of medicine during the pandemic. He is one of the heroes keeping our country going during this crisis.

Theresa Wise

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Editor
Steve Clarke
smclarke_333@hotmail.com
News editor and writer
Matthew Bell
bell127@btinternet.com

Production, design, advertising
Gordon Jamieson
gordon.jamieson.01@gmail.com
Sub-editor
Sarah Bancroft
smbancroft@me.com

Royal Television Society
3 Dorset Rise
London EC4Y 8EN
T: 020 7822 2810
E: info@rts.org.uk
W: www.rts.org.uk

Subscription rates
UK £115
Overseas (surface) £146.11
Overseas (airmail) £172.22
Enquiries: publication@rts.org.uk

Printing
ISSN 0308-454X
Printer: FE Burman
20 Crimscott Street
London SE1 5TP

Legal notice
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The views expressed in *Television* are not necessarily those of the RTS.
Registered Charity 313 728

TV diary

Screenwriter **Dan Sefton** deals with bereavement and attempted suicide when he puts his pen to one side and returns to A&E



Saturday morning, 7:00am. Heading into the weekend shift on my motorbike. A small bonus of returning to the NHS is having permission to ride to and from work.

I scoot past a small herd of red deer grazing by the side of the road, tempted down from the hill by the empty roads and the promise of sweet verge grass. An almost perfect post-apocalyptic visual.

As a rural motorcyclist, I fear deer more than anything else, convinced my ultimate fate is to be speared by a stray antler as I whizz around a blind corner at full lean. Thinking of the NHS, I slow down a bit.

■ **Over at the Emergency Department, the phoney war is in full swing. It's quiet, too quiet. However, no one ever says the Q word out loud, so alternatives are used. Apart from a steady stream of Covid-19 patients, most people are avoiding the hospital.**

The talk is of people dying at home, too scared to attend for the common or garden things we can actually treat.

One of our healthcare assistants, Paula, has volunteered for the Nightingale unit in Bristol but hasn't been called up yet. She's fuming at this injustice.

Paula always has an opinion on TV and is a good and fearless critic. It's

nice to be reminded of how people really consume television. They're smart and they want to be entertained. But it's not life and death.

■ I see a man in his seventies with a swollen leg. He has had a probable deep-vein thrombosis for over a week but hasn't attended until now. Going untreated that long risks complications. I start him on the correct medication and chat to him.

The nice thing about a slow day is that you can give each patient the time they deserve. Usually, the department exists on the verge of panic. Bedside manner is a luxury.

He informs me that his wife of 50 years died two weeks ago. He almost breaks down when telling me about it, but then catches himself just in time and reverts to pleasantries. A very English reaction. For me, it's almost worse that way.

■ **When I get home, my neighbour is waiting for me – complete with isolating facemask and apologies. She's got a nasty splinter under her fingernail and can't get it out. Agony.**

Luckily, I have the tools to remove it, including the essential local anaesthetic. As I extract the offending jag, I'm aware of the strange coldness that comes over me when having to inflict discomfort for the greater good. As a doctor, you become used to the

necessity of it. The buck stops with you. Tough calls have to be made.

Watching the politicians on the news that evening, I sense they aren't used to this feeling.

■ People often ask me why so many ex-professionals become successful TV writers? I'm more and more convinced it's due to the ability to work hard and persist with something that is difficult.

So many people dream of being a screenwriter, but the reality is surprisingly hard – brutal, even. Some days, it feels like it basically consists of people who are unable to do your job telling you exactly where you've gone wrong, independent of any success you might have had.

Sometimes being a doctor feels like a holiday.

■ **Having said that, I'm struggling a bit with the episode of *The Good Karma Hospital* I'm working on.**

Experience tells me I'll get there, but it doesn't really ever get any easier. My ex-agent, Nick, once told me that, one day, I'd be able to "knock these things out", but that writing nirvana has never materialised.

Part of me suspects that's why I'm still working. Nick died a few years ago. He had a long-term condition that we talked about a lot. Knowing the prognosis meant that I suspected he

would die young a long time before he did. That knowledge can weigh quite heavily.

It happened to me again recently – another friend who died of cancer. After 20 years as a doctor, I feel like I know Death quite well. Not a friend, exactly, but certainly as an acquaintance.

It's very noticeable that so many people are very shocked by the consequences of the virus. For many, mortality has never been a big consideration before. But you can get used to anything.

■ Next day in the Emergency Department I see a woman in the middle of having a breakdown, her anxiety and depression skyrocketing due to the lockdown.

She has drunk half a bottle of bleach and put a bag over her head in an attempt to kill herself. Luckily, household bleach and a “bag for life” is pretty ineffective as a method.

Attempted suicide is a pretty common presentation. Most don't really mean it. The ones who really want to die do it in private. In my previous life as a forensic medical examiner, I had to certify a couple of domestic hangings.

They were moving. Quiet desperation is more common than people think. And it's usually men, middle aged and feeling useless.

My woman is admitted back to

the same mental health ward she left 10 years ago. Chalk another one up to the lockdown.

■ A long time ago, I was asked by a channel controller why the hell I wanted to write TV when I could be a doctor instead?

I knew, even then, that simply making people better wasn't a totally satisfying end in itself. Life is more than existence. People need art, films, sport, comedy, TV (I draw the line at theatre).

Otherwise, life isn't really worth living. I wanted to contribute my own bit to that effort. It seemed like a good answer, but he still didn't commission the show. I got over it.

Not sure what he's doing now, either dead or in America, one of the two.

■ After a long weekend, I watch a programme I recorded on ITV – a Euro '96 nostalgia fest. I'd hoped it would cheer me up but, weirdly, it has the exact opposite effect. Life really did seem better then, before coronavirus, terrorism and Facebook.

On the news, the politicians still veer between terrified and incompetent, the NHS steadfastly tough and heroic. Three lions led by donkeys?

Dan Sefton's credits as a screenwriter include Trust Me and The Good Karma Hospital. He is the co-founder of Seven Seas Films.

‘AFTER 20 YEARS AS A DOCTOR, I FEEL LIKE I KNOW DEATH QUITE WELL’

If you are suffering mental health problems, the Samaritans can be reached on 116 123 and jo@samaritans.org

COMFORT CLASSIC



Only Fools and Horses

BBC

If you can judge a sitcom solely on the strength of its catchphrases, *Only Fools and Horses* is a gem. Three decades on from its heyday, Derek “Del Boy” Trotter’s sayings – “lovely jubbly”, “you plonker” and “cushty” – are part of our everyday language. We even remember his terrible Franglais – “*mange tout, mange tout*, as the French say” – by which Del meant “no problem”.

But *Only Fools and Horses* also had slapstick – the smashed chandelier and Del Boy falling through the bar – to rival Laurel and Hardy in its set-up and execution; idiocy – Del Boy and Rodney, dressed as Batman and Robin, thwarting muggers; and no little poignancy.

Matthew Bell on why Del Boy and Rodney are a comedic match made in heaven

The late John Sullivan’s sitcom ran for seven series on BBC One from 1981 to 1991, continuing, on and off at Christmas, until 2003. It was absurdly popular – 24.3 million people watched a 1996 special, the biggest audience ever for a UK comedy.

At its heart were David Jason’s Peckham market trader Del Boy and Nicholas Lyndhurst as his hapless younger brother Rodney, more often than not

the target of Del’s “plonker” jibes. “I’ve got this horrible feeling,” Rodney once said, “if there is such a thing as reincarnation, knowing my luck, I’ll come back as me.”

Sullivan, who grew up in a working-class south London family, was familiar with Del Boy’s world and the characters that populated it; most memorably, second-hand car dealer Boycie (played by John Challis) and daft-as-a-brush road sweeper Trigger (the late, great Roger Lloyd-Pack). These were comic characters that could have been penned by Charles Dickens, whom Sullivan revered.

But *Only Fools and Horses* was a sitcom, not a novel, so the characters

Ear candy

– like *Dad's Army* before and *The Fast Show* to follow – came replete with catchphrases; often, given Del Boy's pretensions, in French. A Peckham boy might say "Gordon Bennett"; Del inexplicably settled on "*La plume de ma tante*".

Sullivan had already given British TV one enduring character – Robert Lindsay's Tooting Popular Front revolutionary Wolfie Smith in BBC One sitcom *Citizen Smith*.

In Derek Trotter – with the help of David Jason's considerable acting chops – he created a second. Del Boy was as delusional as Wolfie, but chose Thatcherism rather than Marxism as his creed.

Selling hooky gear from the back of his yellow, three-wheeled Reliant Regal, Del Boy was only ever one deal away from a life of luxury, far from his flat in Nelson Mandela House.

Accessorised with an outsized mobile phone, playboy cigar and the worst of 1980s fashion, Del Boy ducked and dived. He bottled Peckham Spring Water and sold men's wigs as the "Bruce Willis look". As he was fond of saying, "This time next year, we'll be millionaires!"

If he resembles any Dickens character, Del Boy is David Copperfield's ever-hopeful Wilkins Micawber, who is convinced, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, that "something will turn up". Sullivan probably thought the same: years later, he wrote a comedy-drama for ITV, *Micawber*, with David Jason in the title role.

Sullivan was unable to repeat the success of *Only Fools and Horses*. A spin-off, *The Green Green Grass*, relocated Boycie's family to rural England and ran for four series, while a prequel, *Rock & Chips*, took the Trotter family back to the Peckham of 1960.

The truth, perhaps, is that Del Boy – like Harry Enfield's Loadsamoney character and *Minder's* dodgy importer/exporter Arthur Daley, beautifully played by the late George Cole – belongs to the London of the 1980s when every wide boy seemed to be making obscene amounts of money. Except, of course, lovable Del. "*Mange tout, mange tout*", as the French don't say. ■

Only Fools and Horses is on Gold and also available on BritBox.



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No Such Thing as a Fish

If you're running out of questions for your next Zoom quiz or the conversation is running a little dry with friends or family, *No Such Thing as a Fish* may be just what you need.

Hosted by *QI's* question researchers, also known as the QI Elves, the podcast has enlivened people's commutes since it launched in 2014, with a weekly dose of unbelievable facts and stories that didn't make the series.

In each episode, researchers James Harkin, Andrew Hunter Murray, Anna Ptaszynski and Dan Schreiber discuss the best pieces of trivia they've come across that week.

Learn and laugh your way through some of the world's most mind-boggling facts. These include the conclusion that

at least 61 species live in an elephant's footprint, the Big Bang was quieter than a Motörhead concert, rats were once the size of hippos and the most dangerous job in Britain is – yes, you guessed it – a hairdresser.

The podcast title comes from the "fact", unveiled in a *QI* episode, that there is no scientific basis for describing a disparate multitude of unrelated sea creatures as "fish". That was the conclusion of biologist Stephen Jay Gould, who spent a lifetime studying sea creatures.

The podcast has spawned its own TV spin-off, *No Such Thing as the News*, multiple live tours and a series of books filled with the world's weirdest news.

With more than 300 episodes, *No Such Thing as a Fish* will help keep you entertained through long days in isolation.

Kate Holman

WORKING LIVES



Killing Eve:
a 'fantastic
experience' for
a Foley artist

BBC

Foley artist

Foley artist Ruth Sullivan has been adding sound to TV programmes for more than two decades, most recently to *Killing Eve*. In post-production, she mimics the actors' steps and actions – and, for the BBC thriller, the gruesome murders – to add authenticity to the sound. Her craft is named after Jack Foley, who pioneered performing effects live and in sync with the pictures on early Hollywood talkies.

What does the job involve?

We get a feel for a programme and then record a “moves track”. I stand in

front of a microphone holding different pieces of cloth such as denim, cotton and silk, moving the material to match the movement of the actors on screen. Then we mimic footsteps, using different shoes, and work on spot effects, such as closing a door, making tea or shuffling paper.

So, you're trying to recreate the sounds made by actors?

We can also, say, recreate the sound of leaves blowing in the wind. We are informed by what's on the screen and try to recreate everything that makes a sound in a scene. Then it's up to the sound mixer to decide if the Foley

effect is needed to accentuate a sound or movement, or whether to stick with the location sound.

Where do you work?

Largely in dedicated Foley studios, which have the props and the surfaces you need to create the effects. I bring my suitcase with me, which is mostly filled with different types of shoes. We take about three days to record the effects for an hour of drama.

Why not use pre-recorded effects?

A sound effects editor does that, creating and bringing in sounds for a full track of sound effects. But, for the

detailed sound, it's so much easier to record them as they happen on screen – an actor may put a glass down on a table, but is it done with care or anger? Does it have ice clinking in it? You could spend hours trawling through an effects library to find an effect that matches what you see on screen.

How did you become a Foley artist?

I was struggling to find dancing and acting work in the 1990s, and signed up for a small agency that was training dancers to do Foley work. The agency taught us some tricks of the trade and I was allowed into the studio. When I started, we worked in pairs; now that only happens on the bigger films. I was the junior in a partnership for my first couple of years.

It must help that you are also an actor and dancer?

It does, and there are a few of us in the Foley world. In theory, we have rhythm and co-ordination, and are used to following a choreographer. I like to get into the drama of a piece – that's the actor side of me coming out.

What was your first programme?

Half a day's work at Shepperton Studios in 1996 on ITV's *Soldier Soldier*, which starred Robson Green and Jerome Flynn. It was terrifying – the first effect I had to do was somebody jumping out of a plane.

What Foley effects have you most enjoyed doing?

On *Highlander: Endgame*, I learned how to replicate the sound of heads being chopped off and all sorts of fantastically over-the-top effects. BBC One thriller *Bodyguard* was great fun – there was a car crash one minute, machine guns the next, and then the fine detail of the relationship between the two protagonists, Richard Madden's bodyguard and Keeley Hawes' politician.

I've worked on all three series of *Killing Eve*, which has been a fantastic experience. The sound mixer loves Foley, so the stuff we do is often mixed at a high level, adding this soundscape of atmospheric sound.



What has been your most challenging work?

I worked on the film of the controversial Russian *Dau* project, in which subjects lived *Big Brother*-style in a Soviet-era research institute. I did two weeks of Foley effects, many of which were gruesome. There were pigs being slaughtered and a violent sex scene – it was vile.

What makes a good Foley artist?

You need a good ear, and a feel for what works in terms of the loudness and texture of sound. And you need to be able to adapt: to working on different types of programme, which make different demands of you; to the people you work with; and to the facilities available.

What are the best and worst aspects of the job?

The best is making a mess and making a noise – all the things you're not allowed to do in life. The worst is the lack of recognition within the industry. Sadly, Foley artists often don't get credits and are usually missed off award nominations or screening

invitations. Yet, no drama or feature film would be released without us.

Do Foley artists work outside TV and film?

I've worked in opera, on Simon McBurney's production of *The Magic Flute*, mimicking the performers and synching the sound live. For that, I was visible on stage in a booth, from which I also added atmospheric sound. I got to use a huge thunder sheet, which I played with a violin bow and a poker, making all these weird, wonderful and huge sounds.

How has the job changed over time?

We record more Foley effects now for a programme. Modern TV drama has more close-ups, which means we need to recreate more sounds – the detail we go into is extraordinary.

Dramas such as Netflix's *Stranger Things* and *Killing Eve* use Foley as a method to bring the audience into a scene. It's a good time to be a Foley artist – I'm really enjoying my work. ■

Foley artist Ruth Sullivan was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

Tanya Moodie, the winner of the RTS Breakthrough Award for her role in *Motherland*, is taking lockdown in her stride, discovers Caroline Frost

Counting her blessings

Even in this strange world of lockdown, it's all relative. While many of us can amble to our backyard or at least to the hall cupboard, Tanya Moodie is stuck on a chair when I speak to her via FaceTime at her sunny south London home.

"I'm on lockdown 2.0," she explains, flipping her screen to show off her leg in plaster up to the knee. What happened? She grimaces. "It was April Fool's Day, I got over-excited trying to punk my daughter, and ended up falling down the stairs."

As I am to discover during our chat, Moodie is a resolutely glass-half-full kind of person, even faced with a dislocation and bad break requiring a metal plate. "It could have been so much worse. My partner was home at the time, so he could drive me to hospital; the orthopaedics department was empty and able to treat me quickly. My daughter is 12, old enough to attend to her own home schooling. There were lots of things in place to make me feel lucky."

What kind of TV is providing distraction? Like everyone else, Moodie and her partner have been sucked in by Netflix's *Tiger King* – "although we had to ration ourselves to two episodes a night as it's an assault on the senses". Other delights include quirky, generally American, comedies, often female-led or with an African-American protagonist.

"I'm drawn to things that feel as though they started out small with a gem of an idea and then mushroomed."

Moodie is filling evenings when she should have been on stage at the Almeida Theatre, north London, in *Daddy: A Melodrama*, the eagerly awaited UK debut of US playwright Jeremy O

Harris. What of its return later in the year? She shrugs. "Everyone wants it to happen, it's a case of getting the ducks in a row."

She is sad for two colleagues in particular. "Director Danya Taymor's talent should be known beyond the borders of the US. And for the writer, Jeremy, this would have been his introduction to the British stage."

Moodie could be forgiven for feeling a similar frustration for herself after winning this year's RTS Breakthrough Award for her performance as Meg in BBC Two sitcom *Motherland*. With such recognition, a whole new host of phone calls, meetings and offers was surely hers for the taking, except...

She has the calm smile of a long-time practising Buddhist. "I'm very philosophical about these things. Over the years, I hope I've developed the understanding and wisdom not to attach to outcomes, to what I think should happen next. There's no clear trajectory.

"Being a Buddhist fundamentally paints the picture of my worldview. It's my toolkit," she explains. "So far in my career, there is nothing I can complain about at all. I've had a wonderful time, worked with amazing people and always earned enough to survive. I would hate to think that something pops in my head, 'Now I'm owed this.' That would be deeply toxic and unhelpful."

To be sure, she has enjoyed plenty already for which to be thankful. As a child growing up in Ottawa, she credits her mother's career in medicine for her own pragmatic, hard-working approach and her father's love of Shakespeare for introducing her to the Bard.

He is now ailing, and she movingly recounts a recent trip home to Canada where "he could barely remember our names but he could still recite

Shakespeare. Of course, I was blubbing."

Moodie was inspired to act by watching other teenagers, including her own brother, Andrew (also an actor), and thinking, "I could do that". She decided, aged 17, "If I'm going to do this, I want to have a scholarship", and pursued her acting dream all the way to Rada, arriving with one suitcase in London in 1990 – "IRA bomb threats, tall Georgian buildings, narrow streets and tiny cars, plus tins of steak and kidney pie – what is that? – and sudden tea breaks in the middle of whatever we were doing."

As a graduate, armed with a two-year visa and an agent, Moodie's career began, but with no stardom in her sights. Instead, she remembers, "I wanted to be a working actor, an actor's actor."

Talent will out. The years since have brought accolades including a critically acclaimed *Medea*, an Olivier nomination for her role as Esther in *Intimate Apparel* at north London's Park Theatre and, particularly satisfyingly, her Gertrude in an all-black casting of *Hamlet* for the RSC.

Ever-thoughtful, Moodie herself questioned director Simon Godwin on the value of this, and remembers, "It was delightful, so organic. The director told me he just wanted to create an entire world around his star, Paapa Essiedu, it was that simple."

Before she knew it, Moodie felt at home in the theatre – "it was my home, my back garden, I'd carved my furrow and I knew what I was doing" – and, initially, she felt the opposite in TV-land.

Understandably, she is wary, and perhaps weary, of talking about diversity. "There was a big drive to diversify casting. I've seen every phase. You try not to get bitter because it's a journey,"



Tanya Moodie

Tanya Moodie/Fiona Fletcher Photography

she says, but she remembers several occasions when it was clear that the role she was reading for was not written for a woman of colour.

“People write for what they know. As an actor, I was thinking, ‘How do I not come across as a square peg in a round hole?’ I didn’t have the self-belief. Plus, if you can see it, you can be it – and, in TV, I never saw the woman I am in a narrative, so part of me never thought I deserved to be there.”

Fortunately, on the set of an episode of *Prime Suspect*, an angel appeared to Moodie in the form of Helen Mirren. “On the first day, the name of my character wasn’t quite right, and I sat at the read-through feeling out of place. Helen Mirren came over and told me, ‘I don’t think your character’s name is right. Have a think about what she should be called and I’ll talk to the writers.’ I felt so moved, knowing she saw it, too, and she gave me a bridge.”

That meant, by the time the role of Meg in *Motherland* appeared on the table, Moodie was doubting herself less and punching higher. “It felt such a great fit.”

On her third audition, Moodie decided to root inside her Buddhist toolbox, reminding herself, “I have to let go, and just do the work.” It paid off and gave the actor the chance to explore that “me-ness” that had been missing from many previous roles.

“They asked me, ‘What would Meg look like?’ I said, ‘She’s a professional woman who’s already made it. She’s beyond trying to impress anyone. She’s going to be herself, she’s going to have her Afro out.’”

Thus was Meg born in all her ball-busting, tequila-swilling, alpha-female glory, together with some fresh fan and industry appreciation for the woman who created her.

What’s next? With her business partner Sarah Rutherford, Moodie runs a production company with two projects in development, although she squirms, “I don’t know how much I’m allowed to tell you.” Suffice to say, both have prospective lead roles for Moodie that will surely make the best of her palpable glow.

She says herself, “I’d love to feel the confidence on TV that I feel in theatre. I’m getting there. I stand on set and I realise, ‘I see now how everything fits together and I’m part of it.’”

And even in this most confusing of times, Tanya Moodie once again counts her blessings. ■

Campus closures
have left many
students in limbo



Young lives on hold

Anne Dawson learns how RTS bursary students have been coping during the crisis

‘It’s all a bit of a mess, really,’ says Charlotte Humphreys. ‘I was living in south London, which had the most cases of Covid-19 in the UK, so I packed some of my most important stuff into Ikea bags and left.’

‘I’m paying £700 a month for a room I’m not living in, my stuff is at four different addresses and I’m staying with my Dad, who has a terminal lung condition. I bought a car, an absolute banger, for £275, because I need to get shopping for my Dad.’

Charlotte is coming to the end of the second year of her course at London’s University of the Arts. In common with many other RTS bursary students, her home life is, at the best of times, not without its challenges, and this is not the best of times.

Alicia Newing, studying film and television production at Hertfordshire University, was looking forward to graduating (she’s on track for a First) and taking up a six-month contract at post-production company Clear Cut, now postponed indefinitely. ‘Be prepared for an outpouring of emotion,’ she says, as we agree a time to speak.

When we do talk, she is surprisingly calm as we discuss her final-year project. Alicia and her group have invested so much time and energy in it, they are trying to complete it remotely – despite it no longer forming part of their assessed work.

‘I’m going to continue applying for jobs, but the likelihood is that most places won’t hire anyone for at least a few months,’ she says. ‘Especially when there’s so few shows in

production. I'm worried about losing momentum and getting stuck in a rut. I know there are thousands of people in this industry who will also be stuck. It's going to be harder than ever to get a foot in the door."

Similar stories are told by many of the students. Those graduating this year have had the worst of it, as universities were forced to close as part of the lockdown. The end of the final year is usually a time for collective celebrations, but not for this year's graduates. Whether to stay at uni or go back home was a difficult choice – most of the students had about 24 hours to make up their minds and pack.

"I didn't get to say goodbye to the friends I'd made at uni. We didn't know it would be our last rehearsal, our last lecture, our last project meeting," says Josie Bakewell, a final-year student at Staffordshire University. "Graduation ceremonies are postponed, and end of year/degree celebrations have been cancelled."

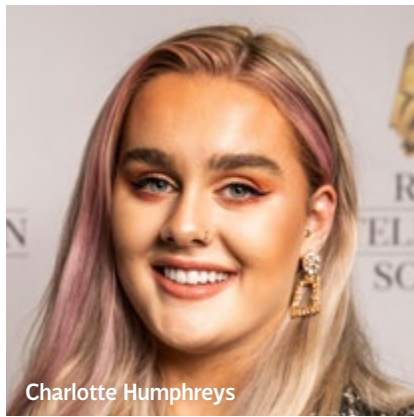
Naturally, students are concerned about their results. The goalposts have moved – and no one is quite sure where to. Some students have been given new project briefs, with the opportunity to use archive footage.

But these depend on the students having their own equipment, which they often lack. Other universities have replaced exams with course work, or, in some cases, open-book exams.

One first-year journalism student, Oliver Youd, had his exams suspended, then reinstated. "I didn't feel motivated to study," he says. "I had mentally switched off from uni. Now, I've got to get my head back into it. I have an old computer and unreliable internet. The libraries are closed. It makes it hard to stay focused and positive."

Income is a big issue for many of the students, who support themselves through part-time jobs, often in hospitality, entertainment or on campus. Several are uncertain about their employment status or whether they are likely to be paid during lockdown.

Charlie McMorine, a final-year student, had more warning of the impending shutdown than most. He was working for Manpower in the equipment-hire shop at Birmingham City University, which runs a partnership scheme with Wuhan University of Science and Technology.



Charlotte Humphreys

WE NEED INFORMATION ON WHAT'S ACTUALLY GOING ON IN THE TV INDUSTRY

"It started a week or so before the lockdown," he says. "First, we were told we couldn't hire out any mics, then any audio equipment. It was all very strange. I don't know what's happening about my job or whether I'm going to be paid."

The students recognise that universities are having a tough job making decisions with so much uncertainty over how the pandemic will play out.

Nevertheless, the students all see the potential for a better "new normal" in the future, including reduced levels of pollution and potentially less commuting. For some, enforced isolation has led to increased creativity as they have revived old interests and taken up new ones. Technology bursary student Keoni D'Souza has created a series of podcasts, *Sip By Sip* (www.expluce-player.co.uk/sip-by-sip.html); Charlie is honing his skills in drone flying; Charlotte has knitted a scarf. Many had been in touch with old friends on social media.

Generally, people have been kinder and more compassionate. In some cases, tutors or bursary mentors have been particularly helpful, offering advice on how to navigate the uncertainties. Overall, there has been a shared sense of "we are all in this together".

The students' rapid departure from university and the postponement of their transition into work has, however, left many feeling a deep sense of loss, anxiety and concern over their futures.

Research by the charity YoungMinds on the impact of Covid-19, published on 30 March, shows that vulnerable young people have been particularly affected by social isolation. The lockdown has turned their world upside down as routines and support systems have been eroded.

"We need small challenges to focus on," says Charlotte Humphreys. "And information about what's actually going on in the TV industry."

Understandably, students have wanted speedy answers to their questions and universities have had to make some quick decisions. Many have adopted a "no detriment" policy, which means that any assessment or exam taken during this period will not be detrimental to average grades achieved before the lockdown.

However, these schemes can't mitigate against students having no final project to demonstrate their talents to potential employers, or losing that highly sought-after placement they worked so hard to secure.

These are issues for our industry partners to consider. Many are already stepping up to the challenge. In homes across the UK, people are delivering online conferences or webinars for students, usually free of charge.

A big thank you from the RTS is due to the talent managers at All3Media, Anouk Berendsen and Tamara Durnford, who are providing webinars for graduating bursary students (see RTS news report on page 34).

Thank you also to our mentoring volunteers, many of whom have taken the opportunity to check in with their mentees. The students really appreciate these connections. Social isolation makes them even more valuable.

If you find yourself with unexpected time on your hands and have knowledge or skills that would be helpful to those about to join the industry, please consider mentoring for the RTS or delivering an online masterclass. Let's all help the class of 2020 to get the foot in the door they deserve. ■

Anne Dawson spoke to 20 of the 162 RTS bursary students and alumni in the fortnight leading up to Easter. If you would like to offer your services as a mentor or to deliver an online webinar or masterclass, please email Anne or Megan Fellows at bursaries@rts.org.uk.



Channel 4

No ordinary Joe

Warm, witty and occasionally waspish, Joe Lycett is just the man to keep us entertained during lockdown. It's fortunate, then, that he is presenting two lengthy prime-time TV series, with another on the way. And after a whirlwind few months making them, Lycett – while mindful of the suffering that Covid-19 has brought many – concludes that the new normal has been beneficial to his mental health.

Being forced to stop work has made Lycett, 31, slow down and enjoy the simpler things in life. “It’s weird, but I don’t feel as anxious as I used to,” he says, while isolating in his house in

Joe Lycett is filling peak-time slots on BBC One and Channel 4. Roz Laws checks out the upward trajectory of the comedian who takes on the corporates

Birmingham. “For the past year, I’ve had mild anxiety symptoms, where I feel sick and dizzy, but that’s all gone. I know, for a lot of people, their anxiety has spiked – but I’m the opposite.

“My wild schedule is not nearly as wild now. I can take stock and do

simpler things. And I don’t have to put any pants on. Selfishly, this is all quite nice for me.”

The hard work that he put in pre-lockdown means he can cheer us up with two series – the Channel 4 consumer show *Joe Lycett’s Got Your Back* and BBC One’s *The Great British Sewing Bee*, shown on Fridays and Wednesdays, respectively.

He was also in the middle of making Channel 4’s *Travel Man*, taking over from Richard Ayoade as presenter of the celebrity travel guides. That has been put on hold.

Lycett’s career began a decade ago when, a year after he won Chortle’s Student Comedian of the Year, he took the Best Newcomer title. Just 12 months later, he was co-hosting a Saturday-night

BBC One entertainment show alongside Alexander Armstrong. *Epic Win* flopped but Lycett's career went from strength to strength.

He hosted *Live at the Apollo* and became a regular on *Countdown* – the normal show and *8 Out of 10 Cats* version – and *QI*. He has competed on *Taskmaster* and Radio 4's *Just a Minute* and has stood in for Sara Cox and Rylan Clark-Neal on Radio 2.

Perhaps one of his career highlights was bemusing Nicole Kidman with his Black Country accent while sitting on Graham Norton's chat-show sofa.

He is particularly proud of *Got Your Back*, which has made us laugh while achieving results, not least for a small Welsh brewery engaged in a legal battle with luxury fashion house Hugo Boss. Boss Brewing in Swansea was one of several companies sent cease and desist letters by the multinational for using part of its name. Lycett changed his name by deed poll to Hugo Boss to show his support and annoy the designer outlet.

The story was widely covered by media around the world and he became the answer to a quiz question on *Saturday Night Takeaway*. "It's mad how it escalated," says Lycett. "I think I've made my point, and the brewery is delighted with its higher profile."

He has now returned to being Joe Lycett, but the publicity has had one positive effect on his life. "I'm used to being recognised a bit and getting that quizzical look from people trying to place me. Now I get the look, then they remember about Hugo Boss and start laughing, when I haven't even said anything. For a comic, that's wonderful, the easiest gig ever."

Got Your Back's hour-long format is twice the length of the episodes of the first series and the run has increased from six to nine episodes.

"The scale of it is bigger," says Lycett. "Last series, we got back thousands of pounds for consumers; this year, it's millions. We're taking on big companies who are beginning to take us more seriously."

"At first, they thought it was just some comedian messing around doing stunts and didn't realise we have a team of amazing researchers who used to work on programmes such as *Watchdog*."

Uber Eats had to improve its policy around restaurants' food hygiene after



Joe Lycett in *The Great British Sewing Bee*

BBC

'WHEN I GET BAD SERVICE I USUALLY COWER AND SAY NOTHING'

Lycett set up a dirty skip as a takeaway on the app. He flash-mobbed NatWest's HQ and set up fake social media accounts for one of its senior executives, pushing the bank into returning £8,000 to a customer who had been scammed.

It would seem that you would cross this champion of consumer rights at your peril, but perhaps not.

"When I get bad service, I usually cower and say nothing. I think it would be a bit crass to complain about being ripped off, because I'm doing all right. But, when my friends had holidays cancelled, I was all, 'You need to send them this form for a refund'."

"And, recently, I sent Asda a 'subject access request' under the Data Protection Act, as I noticed that they filmed me at the self-service checkouts."

"I asked to see the footage and they sent me a grainy clip of me packing my stuff. I haven't worked out what I can do with that yet, but it's useful for annoying companies because it wastes their time."

The Great British Sewing Bee is also enjoying a higher profile. It was promoted from BBC Two to One with a record 12 amateur contestants competing over 10 weeks as they sew

perplexing patterns, transformations and made-to-measure outfits.

"His programmes are perfect for the current time," says costume designer Jenny Beavan. Lycett lodges with her in London. He calls Beavan his "other mother" and celebrated with her in Hollywood when she won an Oscar in 2016. "*Got Your Back* is wonderful. He has such a brilliant energy, which is what we need now. He's incredibly funny but also genuinely likes doing good."

"Joe is very kind, warm and fun, and good with people. I don't like competition programmes, because I hate seeing people lose, but Joe makes it better on *Sewing Bee*."

Beavan first met Lycett when he became friends with her daughter, theatre producer Caitlin, when they were drama students at Manchester University.

"When I first met him, I thought he looked really weird," she recalls. "He wore oversized cardigans and had strange, long comb-over hair. He looks 10 years younger now and so stylish."

"I said that, if he ever needed anywhere to stay in London, he'd be welcome with us. Then he kind of moved in. A lot of people have stayed in the attic of my huge house in Peckham. It was very useful for Joe when he was starting out in London."

"He's incredibly easy to live with and I don't even get annoyed with his habit of leaving cups on the side instead of putting them in the dishwasher. It's always a joy when he comes back. I miss him, although we have hilarious WhatsApp exchanges."

How is Lycett spending lockdown? "I'm turning into my mother, because I'm really getting into gardening," he says. "My kitchen table is covered with pots of borlotti beans, tomatoes and aubergines. I'm even trying to grow a lemon tree from seed."

"I also have an idea for a sitcom, but I don't like the pressure to use this time well. I think there's value in stopping and refocusing on community and family."

"I'm meant to be in Prague filming *Travel Man*. It's probably good that the series is delayed, because, with *Got Your Back* and *Sewing Bee*, it might have been overkill with *Travel Man*, too. That would be a lot of Joe on telly. It won't do me or the people of Britain any harm to have a break." ■

Five thrives under Frow

Channel 5's **Ben Frow** tells Steve Clarke why lockdown is tailor-made for the broadcaster

They say that good things come in threes. When Channel 5 won Channel of the Year at March's RTS Programme Awards, beating Sky Atlantic and BBC Three, the accolade followed identical wins at February's Broadcast Awards and the 2018 Edinburgh TV Awards.

"It was thrilling to win Channel of the Year," says the station's director of programmes, Ben Frow, looking dapper in a dark T-shirt. "We've won each one once; we've finally got them all. I wouldn't actually enter another channel of the year [competition]."

"It was very nice to get the recognition. I don't want to become like Ant and Dec, and try to win it 30 years in a row. I've got enough pressure."

Frow is speaking via Microsoft Teams from his kitchen table, his new workplace in leafy Clapham, south-west London. He may be in lockdown, but Frow is enjoying a high profile thanks to an interview he gave last month to Radio 4's *Media Show* in which he declared that the station's "scrappy" spirit was well suited to riding out the coronavirus storm.

"Content is critical and we are providing a real service to the country,"



Channel 5

Ben Frow

said Frow. “I would hate us to fall behind the SVoDs because we are unable to function.” That seems unlikely. As the smallest of the UK’s terrestrial broadcasters, Channel 5 consistently punches above its weight.

In the seven years that Frow has run Channel 5 he has transformed the station into an agile operator, weaning it off US acquisitions to become a service known for its no-frills, but engaging, factual shows – often hosted by A-list presenters.

History, travel, wildlife and an abundance of royal documentaries are the keys to Frow’s current success. The recent *Anne: The Daughter Who Should Be Queen*, made by ITN, won Channel 5 its biggest audience of the year as 1.7 million people tuned in on the night.

His defining shows have included *The Yorkshire Vet*, the Bafta-winning *Cruising with Jane McDonald* and, of course, Michael Palin’s standout North Korean odyssey. Other established BBC talent such as Jeremy Paxman and Jeremy Vine have become star names on 5’s menu; this month, we get a new, 10-part series *The World’s Greatest Paintings with Andrew Marr*.

Frow’s camp, no-nonsense style, avoidance of jargon and love of television (in his previous job at Channel 4, he ran features and was responsible for such hits as *Jamie’s School Dinners* and *How Clean Is Your House?*) have won him an army of admirers among independent producers.

Last autumn, as a reward for his achievements, the broadcaster’s US owner, Viacom, promoted Frow. As well as being responsible for Channel 5 and its portfolio of digital channels, he now oversees the UK versions of Comedy Central, MTV and the Paramount Network.

Alas, the national emergency means that, in common with ITV and Channel 4, budget cuts are being made – around 10%, according to recent reports.

“The ad market is down 50% year on year. That is catastrophic for commercial broadcasters. We are a commercial broadcaster. It would be naive to think it is going to bounce back in a V shape,” says Frow, who famously once rinsed Judy Finnigan’s tights when he worked as a dresser on *This Morning*.

He continues: “It would be irresponsible to think everything is going to go

back to normal. I’m thinking much longer term. We may be able to work together in some form in the next few months but I have to prepare for a nine-month, year, two-year period, which, economically, is going to be very challenging for this country.”

Ambitious plans for more original UK commissions for Comedy Central,

‘THERE IS A HUNGER FOR REASSURANCE, SECURITY, NOSTALGIA AND HOPE’

MTV and Paramount have been put on hold. So, too, have some of 5’s less cost-effective programmes that were earmarked for production earlier this year.

But, make no mistake, Frow sounds bullish when he weighs up the advantages Channel 5 has in the crisis.

Working with a very small team (he employs just nine commissioners) clearly helps. “We don’t have departments. We are used to working with less money. We are essentially a factual channel. We don’t have big entertainment shows that require studio audiences. And, unlike the BBC and ITV, we have very little drama.”

In other words, existing on a tight budget (in the region of £140m prior to the cuts) and thinking laterally is “what we do anyway. But now it’s magnified and on a much bigger scale.”

Running such a trim ship allows locked-in Frow to speak to his team every day – helpful when maintaining morale. “I am very encouraged by the way our new shows are performing and holding our share,” he says. “I am proud of the team who have pulled together in difficult circumstances and are making Channel 5 a continued success story.”

For the first four weeks of lockdown, Channel 5 grew its audience share by 5%, up from 3.63% to 3.82%. Among hard-to-reach 16- to 34-year-olds, share has increased by 2%. The comparable figure for ABC1s was 5%.

As to what shows he is commissioning, he doesn’t want “programmes that are Covid-looking and which look like they’ve been filmed on Skype, but shows that we would have commissioned without the crisis”.

He adds: “One thing I am not doing is any Covid programming. We should be giving audiences the nice, varied and reassuring schedule that we’ve done up until now. That strategy has worked very well so far. For us, it is very much business as usual.... There is a hunger for reassurance, security, nostalgia and hope.

“I have looked at some of the entertainment shows being done using the Covid criteria and restrictions. Frankly, they don’t work for me. I’d rather not have them.”

Expect more fast-turnaround Saturday-night royal documentaries, including a fresh take on the story of Harry and Meghan. Remarkably, these films take only a week to make. “Often, on a Monday, after I’ve got the ratings, I’ll email ITN and give them another idea. If the viewers like them, we’ll give them more. When they don’t like them any more, we’ll stop doing them.”

Mindful that most of us are locked in, Channel 5’s pre-school strand, *Milkshake!*, has been expanded and Frow is bringing back NBC’s *The Golden Girls* as a daytime treat for older viewers.

He says: “People ignore daytime but, if you mess with daytime, you’re likely to lose a lot of viewers. That’s the foundation of your schedule.

“The one advantage that terrestrial TV has is that it gives you something new all the time,” Frow argues. “It is the same old things on Netflix because, once you’ve done Netflix, you’ve pretty much done it. I gave up actually trying to find anything I wanted to watch on Netflix.”

So what does he admire on rival outlets? HBO’s *Succession*, Channel 4’s *The Windsors* – which he watches on Netflix – and BBC One’s *The Repair Shop*. “I love the fact that *The Repair Shop* has become such a phenomenon. It was a show that was taken for granted and has hit the zeitgeist in terms of what is precious to you – emotions, family, relationships, and heritage. I am jealous of it, but, unlike some other people, I don’t want to copy it.” ■

Full marks to Auntie

Maggie Brown assesses the BBC's 'biggest educational push in its history'

In the week before lockdown began and schools were closed across the UK, the BBC's Children's and Education department realised it had a special duty in this national emergency.

"At that moment, we started to see stretching out before us what the BBC should do in terms of education during the pandemic. We set the ball rolling," says Alice Webb, director of BBC Children's and Education.

The Salford-based teams boldly gambled that most British youngsters could lose half a year of formal education. They would become reliant on makeshift home schooling and online contact with teachers and marking apps.

As a result, the department created a huge, 14-week programme for the summer term, which started on 20 April, hailed as "the BBC's biggest push on education in its history".

It's an "all hands to the pump" operation, developing as it goes along, with rapidly expanding "lessons" and collaborators. For example, the arts initiative *Ten Pieces* from BBC Music, launched in 2014 to introduce children aged 7 to 14 to classical music, and championed by Director-General Tony Hall, has been revived as *Ten Pieces at Home*, while Radio 4 has created *Homeschool History* podcasts based on *Horrible Histories*.

Webb herself has put her career on hold, delaying a move to become CEO of the Universal Music subsidiary Eagle Rock Entertainment.

The BBC's pandemic education initiative, announced on 3 April, is supported by the education secretary, Gavin Williamson ("I am delighted"), and culture secretary Oliver Dowden ("public service broadcasting at its best").

"We've had many conversations

with the DCMS, Department for Education and Ofcom, and the devolved education bodies in the nations. We have had huge backing and they are all very pleased with what we are able to offer," says Webb.

Greg Childs, editorial director of the Children's Media Conference, says: "It is absolutely what the BBC needs to do. I am highly conscious how hard it is for people to organise home schooling and jobs. The BBC has been given the space by the Government to deliver for the nation."

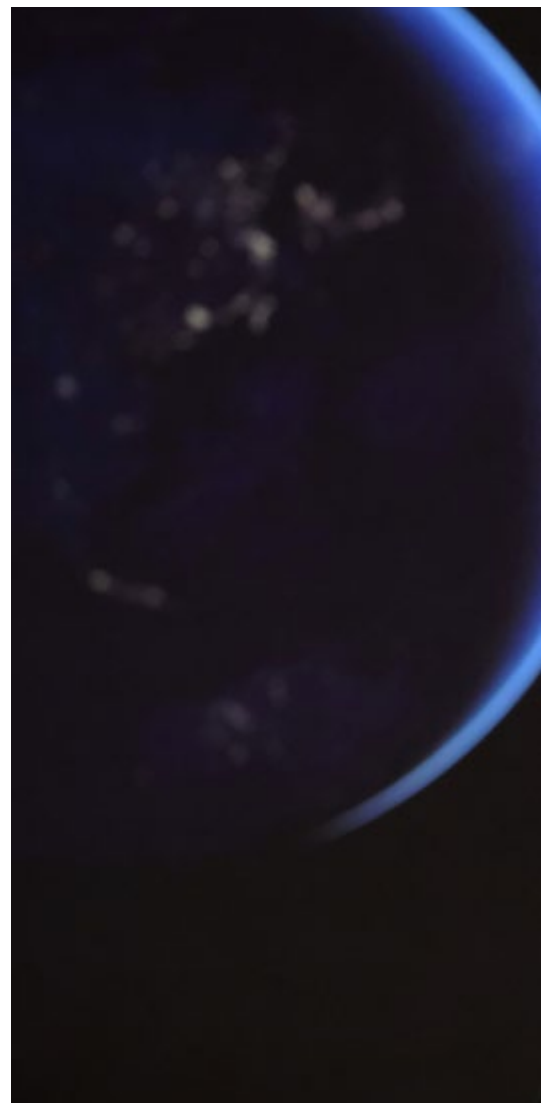
The initiative is anchored on Bitesize, which began in 1998 for online revision in seven GCSE subjects. Then, only around one in 10 homes had internet access.

Bitesize has grown into one of the BBC's most successful brands and now offers more than 35 subjects. During exam times, the service, which is continually updated by teachers, is used by upwards of 3 million learners.

It has long harnessed celebrities to add sparkle to its often brilliantly clear "lessons": Professor Brian Cox, Gary Lineker and John Boyega have all taken part.

The BBC's lockdown offer revolves around six new *Bitesize Daily* 20-minute live programmes tailored to six different age groups spanning five- to 14-year-olds, that outline what children should be learning that day. Teachers set tasks related to the curriculum – with variations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Children are signposted to BBC Bitesize online educational resources, lessons, quizzes, podcasts and videos.

The service is also extending its range up to 18. For example, for the over-16s, there is instruction on applying practical English and maths to



problems such as checking a pay slip.

Familiar faces, such as dancer Oti Mabuse and children's presenters Karim Zeroual, Oti Mabuse and Katie Thistleton, appear in *Bitesize Daily*, filmed in the *Match of the Day* studio in Salford. Content is available via BBC iPlayer, the red button, BBC Bitesize website and app, BBC Four and BBC Sounds.

Popular names on the expanded roster of teachers include Sergio Aguero, Manchester City's star striker (how to count in Spanish), Danny Dyer of *EastEnders* (on Henry VIII), and *Doctor Who*'s Jodie Whittaker. Sir David Attenborough is introducing natural history topics.

Webb declined to disclose the initiative's cost but said: "We are flexing resources to meet needs in these difficult times."

The BBC has a huge archive of existing children's content, and its iPlayer Kids is a safe platform for young users.

Playing an interesting role is Twinkl,



Bitesize Daily tutor: Brian Cox

CosmicShambles.com

about ensuring children can progress in their education, so anything that supports them can only be a good thing. Parents will find it positive to have other places to access instant support and information.

“For educationalists, it is challenging finding the right balance for parents. Some want lots and lots of work, some less.”

Wilson, of Twinkl, has some down-to-earth advice for flummoxed parents: for a new topic of learning, allow one minute for each year of a child’s age – so six minutes for a six-year-old.

Laurie Jacques, an educational consultant in primary school maths, who was involved with the popular *Numberblocks* CBeebies series says: “Disadvantaged parents can’t afford printer cartridges to download vast numbers of work sheets. My fear is that the disruption [to schooling from the lockdown] results in a greater gap between those with supportive environments and those that haven’t got them.”

And she cautions: “Children are conditioned to classroom teaching – 30 kids to one adult. Will they know how to use *Bitesize Daily*? The idea of sitting down to something live or streamed is quite an alien concept.”

But Bitesize could become part of the daily routine. Wilson notes: “This is a huge amount of resources the BBC is providing to specifically meet the needs of school closure. We’ve never seen anything like this before and may never again see anything like it. It’s a success for us if parents have found it easier to support home learning and enjoy it.”

The lockdown world of physical withdrawal and school closures has caused isolation. There is a unanimous view that the BBC is demonstrating the importance of a national, universal public service broadcaster, without a commercial interest.

“This crisis makes you aware of the value of British institutions, the NHS and the BBC,” says Jacques.

Mark Damazer, former controller of Radio 4, puts it this way: “It is uniquely placed. Name me one organisation that is available at a touch of a button in 26 million homes.” He thinks that *Bitesize Daily* could be so popular that it may be hard to discontinue.

And, Greg Childs adds, by harnessing celebrity power and introducing elements of entertainment and fun, “the upside to the whole thing is that education just gets a bit more exciting”. ■

the Sheffield-based “quiet giant” of online teaching support material founded in 2010. Privately owned, Twinkl already works with CBBC and Children in Need and provides packages starting at £4.49 a month.

The company is opening its archive of 635,000 pieces of content for free and making new content available. Its teaching team, the majority of its 550-strong workforce, is making suggestions for Bitesize content. “We are very happy to take part,” says Mark Wilson, Twinkl’s head of strategic partnerships.

Another first-time contributor to the BBC initiative is Yorkshire-based White Rose Maths, which grew from a government-backed initiative to improve the standard of numeracy in schools.

The Premier League, Royal Shakespeare Company and Puffin Books are all providing external content.

Schools have welcomed the

expansion of Bitesize. The head-teacher of Northampton’s highly-rated Parklands primary school, Tracey Coles, says: “We are all really positive about how everyone is just leaping into action and trying to be supportive in these bizarre times, and pulling together to maintain children’s engagement with education.

“The BBC has an excellent reputation for quality and will have worked hard to ensure its offerings are useful and also fun”.

She points out that not all homes are equipped with computers or laptops, whereas everyone has access to a television: “It does provide an excellent solution for those homes which have internet problems, and it adds variety to the day.”

The service also includes daily podcasts for parents on BBC Sounds to give practical advice for the day’s home schooling.

Coles adds: “Parents are worried

A dose of reality



Warner Bros

Contagion

Dr Charlie Easmon, a specialist in public health, assesses how the stars of fictionalised pandemics stack up against real-world heroes

More than 30 years ago, I sat in the St George's Medical School library in Tooting, south London, contemplating a framed cowhide that belonged to a beast called Blossom. The hide came from the cow that the great 18th-century physician Edward Jenner, the founder of immunology, used in an experiment to demonstrate his vaccine against smallpox. Fast forward 33 years and here we are during a pandemic that will last for many months to come. I have lectured on pandemics and was noted, at a conference of private school bursars, mostly ex-army types, for getting them to do the Mexican wave as a way of demonstrating the rolling spread of an infection – something that Boris Johnson's advisors should have known when they failed to stop the Cheltenham Festival.

The actor Hugh Quarshie, my friend and fellow Ghanaian, who plays doctor Ric Griffin in *Holby City*, and I did synchronised “jaw drops” when the locked-down set of this show (and *Casualty*) donated its scrubs, gloves and other personal protective equipment (PPE) to the NHS.

In the UK, the emperor has no PPE. This was epitomised by the brilliant Morten Morland's *Sunday Times* cartoon in which health secretary Matt Hancock tells bemused medical staff: “You are all covering yourselves in glory.” And they mutter: “It's all we have.”

What do feature films and TV representations of my profession tell us about how to handle a global pandemic? Are the doctors and nurses hard-working and exhausted? Are the experts infallible voices of authority? Does everyone have the same plan?

In real life, we have seen nations take different tacks while each has

stressed that its approach is based on the science, but the bigger picture plays out like an anarchic Marx Brothers' comedy.

I love the fact that in *80,000 Suspects* (1963), the doctors and nurses are, indeed, hard-working but the focus is more on the moral dilemmas of one doctor cheating on his wife.

Gwyneth Paltrow plays a naughty lady who meets a ghastly early fate in *Contagion* (2011). Her detractors probably whoop and holler while throwing gloom into the air, but the film cleverly uses tracking shots to illustrate the spread of a Sars-like illness imported from China to the rest of the world. Sound familiar?

The conflict between hard-nosed military experts and soft liberal public health experts is well captured in *Outbreak* (1995). Dustin Hoffman, who loves dogs in the film and therefore must be the good guy, squares off against Donald Sutherland, who looks like he would eat children.

Certainly, the Donald character (any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental) has no compunction about the ultimate public-health measure of simply bombing infected people to hell. When he threatens to do this a second time in the US (in his view, Africa mattered less, of course), Hoffman gives one of his great impassioned speeches. Even the deepest cynic would ditch their bomb safely in the ocean and pass no comment on Hoffman's never-ageing face.

Outbreak is based on the deadly Ebola virus. The scientists in the film talk us through the disease in a reassuring way, as does Kate Winslet in *Contagion*. In fact, her explanation of R-nought is so good that I would use the clip to teach epidemiology classes on how viruses spread. As we should all know by now, R-nought measures how contagious an infectious disease is.

In real life, we have had few scientific superstars. Our own chief scientific advisor, chief medical officer for England and deputy chief medical officer have all lost lustre as the pandemic has rolled on and the experience has belied their projections.

The cow whose hide I contemplated at the start of my medical career would be rolling in its grave at the very idea of promoting herd immunity for a disease that might not produce any.

Dr Anthony Fauci, part of Donald Trump's coronavirus task force, has

both a fan club and a hate club. Many women (and men) want to have his babies, but some are convinced that he's the Vincent Price in this particular horror movie and has sold his soul to Satan.

For conspiracy theorists, Price's famous role in *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) resonates uncannily with the age of Covid-19. In Edgar Allan Poe's tale, the wealthy elite pull the drawbridge up behind them as the

'PANIC IN THE STREETS' SHOWED THAT YOU NEED BRAINS AND BRAWN TO COMBAT AN EPIDEMIC

plague stalks the land outside their castle walls. And, in the modern world, an unholy alliance of Big Pharma and Big Tech allegedly conspires to track and dose us at the same time as 5G makes us glow in the dark.

So far, we have been good citizens and, mostly, stuck to lockdown but might we still see *Panic in the Streets*?

In this excellent 1950 film, directed by the great Elia Kazan, our good doctor, the trusty Richard Widmark, teams up with a cynical but effective hunk of an Irish cop – reminding us that you need brains *and* brawn to combat an epidemic.

Early in our pandemic, on 12 March, public-health expert Professor John Ashton appeared on *Question Time*. Just as depicted in numerous film and TV scenes, a Government smoothie immediately pooh-poohed Ashton's legitimate concerns about allowing mass events, the impact of the disease on care homes and call for mass testing – all since proved right.

Medical and non-medical writers alike have prepared us for what we see now. There's George Bernard Shaw in *The Doctor's Dilemma*: "Who gets treated [or, in our case, tested]?" And Ibsen in *An Enemy of the People*: "Surely, you're kidding, doctor – why close something popular [in our case, a football match or festival]?"

Many viewers have enjoyed former

doctor Jed Mercurio's work, from *Cardiac Arrest* and *Bodies* to *Bodyguard* and *Line of Duty*. Jed has always known how to show the compassion fatigue that comes with medical work and frequent dichotomy of the lovely chap who's a hopeless surgeon and the sexist, playboy bastard who's a great one (Keith Allen).

The late Michael Crichton used his medical knowledge across the wide territory of *The Andromeda Strain*, *Jurassic Park*, *Westworld* and *ER* (George Clooney, incidentally, did wonders for my love life). Crichton specialised in the consequences of following science blindly, the negative effects of well-intentioned experiments, and the reality of hard decision-making in emergencies.

When we finally reflect on this pandemic with a well-aimed retrospectoscope (no bowel prep required), we might wish that we had had the benefit of Winslet's film character (the compassionate great explainer committed to saving lives with no herd in view), a Laurence Fishburne (the competent Centers for Disease Control maestro, who would never mislead with faulty tests) and a Dustin Hoffman (the morally upright scientist seeking a cure).

Instead, we seem to have got a dismal band of *Contagion*'s Jude Law (the conspiracy theorist peddling false drug dreams), Donald Sutherland (prepared to expend any number of poor people to defeat the virus) and Vincent Price (abandon the herd to its fate).

Oh, and I nearly forgot to mention the World Health Organization controversy. President Trump threatens to defund an organisation that the US has systematically underfunded for years, perhaps because it is led by a man who looks suspiciously like Barack Obama with a moustache.

Well, talking of possible alternatives to WHO, if you like a bit of rock 'n' roll (and can cope with the excessive gorgeousness of my little girl on a bat scooter), please enjoy my TEDx talk on that very subject:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=INTICAQJaro ■

Dr Charlie Easmon MBBS MRCP MSc Public Health DTM&H DOccMed is: medical director of Your Excellent Health Service; president of the International Association of Physicians for the Overseas Services (www.iapos.co.uk); co-founder of YEHS We Care; and co-founder of Global Health Action Strategies & Solutions (www.ghass.co.uk).

Life at the sharp end

ITV News chief **Rachel Corp** takes Shilpa Ganatra through her working day



ITN

For most of those who work in the TV industry, the old cliché is true: no two days are the same. But when you're responsible for ITV's lunchtime, evening, and 10:00pm news, there's a structure that can't bend, not even when the world enters lockdown and changes life as we know it. Welcome to the working world of Rachel Corp.

Corp has been *ITV News's* acting editor since 2018, after years of high-level, high-stakes news experience. She joined ITN in 2011, after a spell as the BBC's Moscow producer, climbing to *ITV News London's* editor during the mayoral election debates and the Brexit referendum.

She subsequently led the *5 News* team, pulling together coverage of the 2017 snap election with weeks, rather than months, to prepare, before returning to *ITV News* to cover, among other

things, the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. "But coronavirus is the biggest breaking news story that any of us have had for a long time," she says. "We were watching it coming towards us from Asia, then from the continent, so it's a breaking story that we could predict but couldn't plan for."

Even before "the new normal", Corp would wake at 6:00am every day in Peckham, south London, where she lives with her husband, Laurence Lee, a senior reporter for Al Jazeera, and their two young daughters.

Such is the 24/7 nature of the job, mornings involve a scan through overnight updates, then exercise, either a run or workout at home, with the radio on.

Defined as a key worker, she drives through all but empty streets to ITN's HQ at Gray's Inn Road.

"I feel lucky, as just having a change of scene is healthy mentally," she says. "I appreciate that I get to see a bit of life,

especially as the seasons are changing."

Across ITN, a team of 240 staff deliver ITV's lunchtime and early-evening bulletins and *News at Ten*, in addition to any extras commissioned. They share editorial duties, but one editor focuses on the management aspects each day, while the other runs the show. Corp is at her desk before 8:00am, but the day officially begins at 9:00am with an editorial meeting. She chairs it when she's on duty.

"It used to be a big, packed meeting room, but now there's five or six of us, spread out, two metres apart. Many more are dialling in," she says, adding that, nowadays, she often works from home. "We've had to adapt almost overnight. People have variable internet quality, sometimes you can't hear properly, but we've made it work. Plus, we get a good old peek into people's houses, which is fun.

"At the moment, news is wall-to-wall

coronavirus, so we know the subject we'll be covering. Often, you can't define the political news at 9:00am, but so much of our coverage has been original pieces that we've chosen the day before. I want to find the people who are falling through the cracks, who perhaps aren't being talked about.

"For example, early on, we realised that care homes were going to be a huge issue, not because it was in the newspapers or there was a government press release, but because of our own reporting."

At the start of the crisis, she and her team changed the lunchtime news to include interviews with experts, to deliver information that their audience wanted to know. It appears to have worked: in March, viewership was up by 63% year-on-year, with an average of 1.3 million tuning in.

The morning meeting also discusses how to sensitively challenge the political response. "At the start, we made a commitment to get the Government message out – it wasn't for us to say whether that message was right or wrong," Corp says. "We still held them to account, but not at the expense of drowning the message or criticising the response simply as balance. But now we've moved into a different phase, where there are questions about the economy and exit strategy."

At the end of the meeting, the day's coverage will have been loosely agreed, and assigned in more detail than usual to reduce pressure for the team as they stringently follow the safety rules, whether in the field or in the office. "Like emergency services, we run in the opposite direction to everyone else, and we have to find ways to do that safely," she says.

As if to prove this point, following the editorial meeting, Corp attends an ITN-wide coronavirus meeting with other managers and the heads of editorial, HR and technology, to ensure their policies and guidelines are up to date.

Then, it is the lunchtime news, followed by the first debrief of the day. ITN holds one after each bulletin and they are seen as key to keeping the output on track.

As the diversity and gender lead at ITN, Corp is the first to ensure diversity statistics are reported in the debrief, "although it's an issue that is more challenging now, when we don't often have a choice in who's put up.

"We also discuss what worked and what didn't work. And perhaps it's just

me as a female editor, but I believe it's a space to let out the emotion of it, too – we need to express that a piece was a moving or a tough watch. We can't forget that we are humans in this."

Afternoons are usually for strategic work and liaising with ITV. In between, at 2:45pm, the afternoon editorial meeting decides the shape of the evening news.

She returns home by around 8:00pm, though she's only a phone call away from her team as they complete preparation for the 10:00pm broadcast.

"At least, as my husband and I are both journalists, we understand what each other is going through," she says. In ordinary times, her family of foodies would spend time together in the kitchen, but they were mid-renovation when lockdown began, so it has become a case of moving boxes to create a makeshift cooking space.

Evenings are also the time to catch up with friends via video calls and socialise with the rest of her street. "Everyone has piled in to make sure everyone else is OK, and we've done a few garden drinks, too," she says.

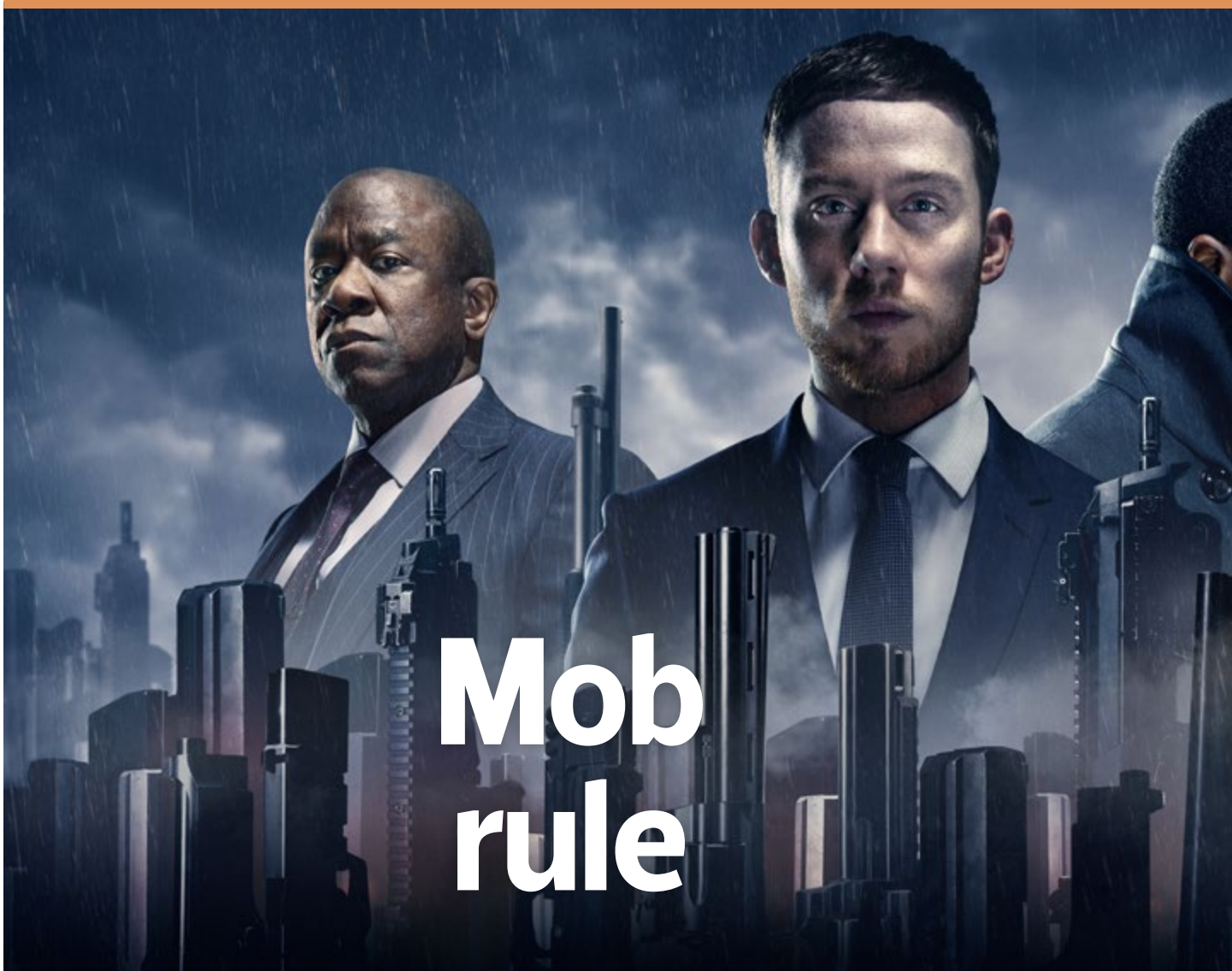
Her shift finishes only after the 10:00pm bulletin has been wrapped up. The last debrief emphasises the positive aspects of the team's work throughout the day. "After that, I can't pretend I don't have a glass of wine at night these days," she says. "Normally, I'd be out several nights a week – I don't need much sleep – but, as we're home, I go to bed around midnight during the week."

The all-consuming work life is only just beginning to ease; at the start of the crisis, she worked around 30 days in a row. "As editor, I am on call 24/7. I've always made myself available and that just is the way it is," she says. "In the first weeks of the crisis, we were all living off adrenaline, but that couldn't be sustained for ever. Now, it's about finding things to replace the adrenaline and maintaining that energy.

"And this is the long haul, so we've been making sure that people have down time. I took six days off at Easter. The last few years have been dominated by Brexit, where you never knew what was coming next, but this is different because you don't know when it is going to end. And we've hardly begun on the global recession, which is so huge in itself."

But addressing the seismic story that remains in front of us for now, that's for another day. ■

'LIKE THE
EMERGENCY
SERVICES, WE
RUN IN THE
OPPOSITE
DIRECTION TO
EVERYONE ELSE'



Mob rule

High-end television drama has become ubiquitous. Even so, it's unlikely that TV audiences have seen anything quite like Sky Atlantic's new crime thriller, *Gangs of London*, a brooding, tense, cinematic tour de force that is most definitely not for the squeamish.

Described variously as a cross between *Peaky Blinders* and *The Irishman*, and "revoltingly inventive", the nine-part series stars Joe Cole (*Peaky Blinders*), Sope Dirisu (*Humans*), Colm Meaney (*Star Trek*), Lucian Msamati (*His Dark Materials*), Michelle Fairley (*Game of Thrones*), Paapa Essiedu (*Press*), and Pippa Bennett-Warner (*Harlots*).

The story begins as rival international gangs jostle to fill a power vacuum created when the head of London's most powerful crime clan, the Wallaces, is assassinated.

"The proposition was very clear," says executive producer Thomas Benski,

An all-star cast leads Sky Atlantic's new action thriller, *Gangs of London*. Steve Clarke dodges the blows

co-founder of Pulse Films, *Gangs of London*'s main producer. "We wanted to make something we felt had never been done before, at least on British television. I think we've achieved that."

The series was created by the award-winning film-maker behind *The Raid* martial arts movies, Gareth Evans, and his long-time collaborator, Matt Flannery, and inspired by a video game of the same name optioned by Pulse Films.

"Using action as a story driver is not something you typically find in British TV. Gareth is a visionary action director. The ambitious narrative of creating this Shakespearian version of modern

London is unique," claims Benski.

"Thanks to our casting director, Kelly Valentine Hendry, we assembled a cast of sophisticated, mostly classically trained, actors who could contrast that genre world with the sophistication and prestige that this drama offers."

Despite his distinguished pedigree (which includes directing period horror film *Apostle* for Netflix), *Gangs of London* is the first time Evans has made a TV series. "Gareth went to a different world when he was developing this show," explains Lucas Ochoa, another of the executive producers. "He's immersed in cinema history – Asian cinema, Hong Kong action cinema and Japanese art cinema. He brought to bear that vast range of references, which is unusual for television."

Certainly, the fight sequences have an almost balletic quality that is rare to encounter on the small screen. But perhaps it is Evans's menacing creation of a hyper-violent and deeply unsettling London that really punches through.



What, then, is the secret of staging these thrilling spectacles? “Preparation, preparation, preparation,” says Evans, whose own TV viewing choices are more likely to feature US comedies, such as *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, than drama. For the fight scenes, he was able to call on his years of experience making martial-arts movies.

He continues: “We spent lot of time interrogating the ideas and made sure that everything in there was there for a reason. When we stage a fight, it’s not allowed to be just purely style and visceral, but has to feel like a real fight. We design every action sequence, every camera angle and every edit that goes into those sequences.

“That allows us to come to set very prepared, so that every department knows what’s required of them, whether it’s wardrobe, make-up, or a different piece of rigging for the camera while we get a certain angle.

“Everyone knows what’s expected of them and how many shots we’re aiming to get in a day in order to be on schedule. It’s a vital process and the one thing I’ve imported from what I do in Indonesia.”

But won’t some viewers have a problem watching such a dark show during these dark times? “No, I don’t think it really plays as dark,” says Ben-ski. “When you get to see the whole show, you’ll see that it has all of the light and shade of great drama. There are flashes of humour. The mix of these different elements is something that will give people some respite in these difficult times.”

Ochoa agrees: “It isn’t a dark show but a fast-paced, thrilling story about families and power. Hopefully, it is an uplifting, kinetic world that has some graphic components to it. Of course, those are not subtle, but I feel they are played out in a world that doesn’t feel dark or bleak.”

Gangs of London may be the stuff of fantasy but it is unquestionably, unrelentingly violent. How does Evans think audiences are likely to react to the violence? “It’s the nature of the show and the world that the characters inhabit. Some people will like [the violence] and some won’t. I fully accept that. Nothing I’ve ever made has been for everyone.” ■

All episodes of *Gangs of London* are available on Sky Atlantic and Now TV.

So why has it taken Evans so long to work in TV? Was he worried that it would be too restrictive for someone used to creating explosive set pieces for cinema in action movies?

“Truthfully, I never really found my footing in terms of a career until I was out in Indonesia [where he made *The Raid* films],” says Evans, who was born and bred in Wales and now lives near Swansea. “There, it was film, film, film, nothing else. Out there, TV was super low-budget, so film was the only option.

“When I returned to the UK, *Apostle* came first and I was then pitched *Gangs of London*. The thing that fascinated me was how culturally diverse the city is. You hear so many different languages on the streets.

“The whole show is set in a heightened version of London. We knew that we wanted to tell a story that would feel almost operatic – grand, full of big emotions and big characters.

“I thought: I don’t think we can do justice to that city in a film. A long-form

TV series made more sense, 10 hours in nine episodes. It’s OK if we want to veer off for 10 to 15 minutes in one episode in order to explore one character. It doesn’t matter if they come from a different culture or speak a different language.

“You can do all of those things in an episodic TV drama, where there’s the freedom and flexibility to tell the kind of story we wanted to.”

He acknowledges that fashioning his trademark elaborate set pieces for TV, rather than film production, proved to be something of a learning curve. Nevertheless, the same painstaking skills were required in order to film the action sequences.

“A high-end drama might shoot for a similar budget, but we’re throwing in explosions and stunts. That’s when it starts to get expensive,” he says.

“Every single fight sequence or set piece might only be two-thirds of a page in the script but could take up to five days to shoot.”



Broadcasters are thinking laterally to fill the void left by Covid-19's impact on the sporting calendar, reports **Matthew Bell**

Netflix's *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*

Netflix

TV sport: All to play for

Welcome to the great British summer of no sport. There will be no Wimbledon, no Euro 2020 football, no Open golf and no Olympics, which leaves the sport broadcasters on the canvas.

Punch drunk they may be, but no one is throwing in the towel. The challenge is to fill the hours of telly set aside for sport this summer and to attract the bumper audiences being enjoyed elsewhere on TV during the lockdown.

Live sport has not disappeared entirely – Taiwanese basketball and baseball anyone? – but there is not much of it about.

“We’re a channel that’s been built on live sports and [coronavirus] has hit us particularly hard,” admits Simon

Downing, head of factual and sport UK at Eurosport. Its key sports – cycling, tennis, snooker and motorsports – and, this summer, the Tokyo Olympics are all in hibernation.

“We want to find innovative ways to represent these [sporting] pillars, first by revisiting archive but also finding ways of offering a fresh perspective.”

During the last week of May, Eurosport will revisit the London Olympics. Different sports will be featured daily as long jumper Greg Rutherford and cyclist Bradley Wiggins, among others, offer retrospective commentary on their gold-medal-winning performances. “It seems a lifetime ago,” says Downing, “but never has it felt more right to return to 2012.”

Athletes will film themselves using Zoom. So don’t expect the picture quality of a normal linear broadcast but, during the lockdown, audiences

are hungry for content, even if it is wobbly and grainy.

The BBC’s approach fits the template of the other major broadcasters: wherever a live event is missing, it is offering a like-for-like replacement to “remind people of the great things that sport can do and, we hope, will do again very soon”, Philip Bernie, head of TV Sport, tells *Television*.

“We are doing our best to sate the appetite of sports fans, by showing some great sports from the past and adding in some lively comment.”

The BBC can’t hope to fill the hundreds of hours not being taken up by a real summer of sport, but it is planning “at least a daily dose” during the Olympics and Wimbledon weeks, including a “celebration of the wonder that is Andy Murray over one of the Wimbledon weekends”, adds Bernie.

E-sports are booming during the

lockdown, and multinational broadcaster Eleven Sports is featuring virtual cycling, motor sports and football in its territories around the world.

The company's CEO, Luis Vicente, says: "This is an unprecedented challenge for the sports media industry but we want to make sure we're there for fans, to offer them some fun and some entertainment at a time they need it more than ever.

"To do this without our usual offering of premium live sport is obviously a challenge but we need to be innovative and experiment with new things. That means a big focus on e-sports."

Eleven is also responsible for covering the aforementioned live basketball and baseball in Taiwan, which have played out in empty stadia. It has made coverage available around the world through Twitter and Twitch, attracting more than 7 million views during one week at the end of April.

Nevertheless, if the content is right, e-sports can attract huge audiences, too. Almost 5 million viewers tuned in to ITV's *Virtual Grand National 2020*. It used CGI animation and algorithms to find a winner – Potters Corner, which won the real Welsh Grand National last year – for the cancelled Aintree race.

Eurosport and the BBC are also experimenting with e-sports, and Eurosport's Downing says: "If these gain traction, we may consider them once the lockdown is over.

"[The crisis] is forcing us to think differently and allowing us to try things that normally we wouldn't have a chance to do because the schedules are populated with contracted content."

Documentaries can help to fill the vacuum left by live events. Netflix's *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*, which follows the previous year's racing and is now into its second season, has won rave reviews for capturing the sport's high-octane drama. But it is impossible to make similarly high-end docs from scratch during the lockdown.

Sky is making the most of films from its NBCUniversal partners, with an impressive roster in May, including docs about Usain Bolt and Conor McGregor, as well as a Sky original on Tiger Woods. But, more than anything, it is football – the UK's national sport – that is being missed.

In sport, it's the hope that gets you. Your football team may be four-nil down, but dreams of an improbable comeback never die. This pretty much sums up the state of the current season.



Basketball from Taiwan in April

CricketLive.com

At the time of writing, only Belgium and the Netherlands have declared their domestic seasons over; around the rest of Europe, fans hope that, somehow, seasons can be brought to a natural end. Broadcasters feel the same.

Both Sky Sports, which holds the majority of Premier League live rights, and BT Sport, home to the Champions League, allowed customers to pause their sport subscriptions when coronavirus ended live sport.

Early June is the current target for a resumption of the Premier League; for fans needing a quicker fix, the German Bundesliga could return, behind closed doors, in May, with BT set to show live Saturday afternoon football – banned in normal times to avoid a clash with UK matches – for the first time in many years.

In the meantime, Sky Sports has launched *The Football Show*, featuring its usual match-day pundits, such as Gary Neville and Graeme Souness, speaking from their living rooms. It has also been raiding its archives for classic matches to include in *Premier League Retro*.

The BBC and ITV, too, are missing football; in their cases, June and July's Euro 2020 tournament. But *Match of the Day*, which celebrates its 56th birthday this summer, remains on air with Gary Lineker at the helm.

Match of the Day: Top 10, a podcast featuring Lineker, Ian Wright and Alan Shearer discussing old Premier League matches from the safety of their homes, has averaged 1.9 million listeners over its Saturday-night run, not

much lower than the 3.2 million enjoyed by *MOTD* earlier in the season when there was actual football to show.

The BBC is planning for the possible resumption of domestic football this summer, something the Government is pushing for hard in a bid to cheer up the nation, or the footie-loving part of it, at any rate.

"When it does return, it won't be returning in the same way as it left, with 50,000-strong crowds and all the apparatus of broadcasting we used prior to the coronavirus crisis," says the BBC's Bernie. "We have to see how we will be allowed to broadcast. It's going to be a really big challenge to space people in galleries and outside broadcast trucks. We're doing a lot of thinking to make it work."

Bernie adds that the BBC is not looking beyond the summer: "At the moment, we're trying to cover the current scarcity, which is testing enough."

As the summer unfolds, more sport could return. Formula One's British Grand Prix at Silverstone is set to go ahead – without spectators – in mid-July. Champions League football could resume in early August, with the delayed Tour de France due later that month. But, like football scores, this is impossible to predict with any certainty.

At least the summer's biggest events – Euro 2020 and the Olympics – are not being lost, merely delayed a year. "All being well," says the BBC's Bernie, "the next two summers should be absolutely extraordinary and packed with wonderful sport." ■

OUR FRIEND IN WALES

When Dr Frank Atherton, Wales's chief medical officer,

said in late April that the pandemic curve had not just been flattened, but squashed, it was reassuring on two levels: it signalled to viewers that the Welsh NHS appeared to be over the worst of Covid-19 and it also suggested that our editorial strategy was working.

Dr Atherton had given a number of interviews to various media outlets that day, but only ITV Cymru Wales viewers heard his seminal statement that the Welsh Government's lockdown measures had "squashed" the virus in Wales.

From the beginnings of this medical emergency, we set out to do live, in-depth interviews with the key decision-makers and frontline workers in our flagship evening news programme, *Wales at Six*.

This has not meant giving those in authority a free platform. Our role is to scrutinise. Extending the time for the interview results in fewer interruptions and more room for delivering information that is hugely important to the lives of our viewers. And which, due to devolution, can sometimes be at odds with what is happening elsewhere in the UK.

As the most-watched peak-time television channel in Wales – and as a national public service broadcaster – our teams of journalists, production staff and programme-makers have a clear and vital role to play in this crisis: to tell the story of what's happening in Wales accurately and impartially.

I could not be more proud of the way our teams have responded.

Phil Henfrey
describes how ITV
Cymru Wales's
focused approach
to covering the
crisis has paid off



Without doubt, they are our greatest asset.

The transition from normal office-based production to home working was unprecedented, swift and essential. Everyone understood that, to keep staff safe at our Cardiff HQ, the majority of us would have to be productive at home.

Within hours, colleagues, who were already multiskilled, were combining their expertise with mobile and other technologies to keep the show on air. One – our health reporter, James Crichton-Smith, who was self-isolating at the time – even commandeered a bath towel to use as a makeshift blue screen for his home-edited, graphic explainer.

Today, 85% of our team are routinely working from their homes and

producing daily national news for Wales in bulletins that run from *Good Morning Britain* to after *News at Ten*.

Alongside news, our current affairs teams have innovated quickly to reformat two programmes that can remain on the air for as long as the story needs. *Wales This Week* is broadcast in the heart of ITV peak time each Thursday evening while *Y Byd Ar Bedwar (World on Four)* is produced for Welsh-language channel S4C. Both programmes are gaining access and providing insights that can sometimes be harder for the daily news cycle to provide.

Our digital team was also quick to find its stride. It was the first to stream the Welsh Government's daily press briefing to our website and social media channels.

Again, the emphasis is to take the time to explain by creating in-depth packages that bring together video, graphics and the written word. The aim is to help make sense of this crisis for new and younger audiences, who want trusted news on new platforms. The reward has been a massive 500% increase in users, year on year.

The relative weakness of the indigenous Welsh news market can result in people who live in Wales relying on media sources that carry little, if any, Welsh content.

Ofcom research shows that people trust ITV in Wales above all other commercial media. During a crisis like this, where the devolved administration is playing such a pivotal role in the life of everyone in Wales, what all the public service broadcasters in Wales are doing right now really does matter. ■

Phil Henfrey is head of news and programmes at ITV Cymru Wales.

RTS Northern Ireland **Matthew Bell** learns how Waddell Media is riding out the coronavirus storm

Little on TV cheers up audiences more than seeing animals brought back to health, so Waddell Media's new series *Work on the Wild Side* is coming to screens at just the right time.

The 20 one-hour shows will be stripped across the daytime week on Channel 4 from mid-May. They follow vets and volunteers who have given up their jobs in the UK and moved to South Africa to rescue animals, and reintroduce them to the wild.

"It's good timing for it to go out now, because we all need a bit of escapism, and to get back in touch with nature," says Jannine Waddell, series executive producer and MD of the Northern Ireland indie.

The idea for the series came to Waddell when she visited a number of animal rescue centres while filming *Francis Brennan's Grand Tour of South Africa* for RTÉ. "It took about a year to convince Channel 4 – you have to be a bit of a stalker to get anything made," she recalls. "Eventually, they gave me some development money to go out and see if the cast existed, and we found these amazing people devoting themselves to saving animals."

Waddell Media shot *Work on the Wild Side* with a combination of local and UK crews. "It was a real mixed bag. We sent out producer/directors and some cameramen, but I also met amazing camera people in South Africa who went out to shoot for us as well."



Jannine Waddell with Hector the hippo

Waddell Media

Working on the hoof

She describes the financing as "a challenging day-time budget", although 7% top-up funding from Northern Ireland Screen "really helped – it is very supportive of the TV industry". Nevertheless, "we had to use every shot... to make our stories. We simply couldn't afford to sit there for weeks [waiting for the perfect picture]."

Channel 4 recently ordered a 10 x 30-minute cut of the series for peak time – a huge bonus for the Hollywood-based factual and entertainment indie during these tough times. BBC Northern Ireland has also just commissioned Waddell Media to make a 3 x 30-minute series, with the working title *Suzie Lee Home Cook Hero*, to be shot this month.

"Before coronavirus hit, the production sector was growing – there's lots of

great creative companies here in Northern Ireland. I think we're going to see quite a lot of them collapse now," fears Waddell.

Her company has had to postpone a number of productions, including *Francis Brennan's 5 Star Training Academy*, for RTÉ and BBC Scotland, and Northern Ireland travel series *Getaways*. Post-production and reversioning of *Work on the Wild Side* has been done remotely and some filming, largely outdoors and by drone, is continuing.

"We follow a safe-filming protocol," says Waddell. "Filming is very limited. We're not doing interviews; we'll pick those up later on."

"It's really tough for freelance staff. We've had to stand down freelancers and furloughed quite a lot of our staff. There was no alternative. It's a hand-to-mouth

industry where cash flow is critical.

"We've been hounding broadcasters to get money out of them; normally, we can be more lenient."

The local TV community needs to work together during the crisis, says Waddell, who chairs Women in Film & Television in Northern Ireland and sits on the RTS Northern Ireland Committee.

Northern Ireland Screen has made extra development funding of up to £50,000 available for production companies working in factual/entertainment, feature documentary, TV drama and independent film.

"We are a tight community and work very collaboratively, and we're going to try to support each other," says Waddell. "We need to work together as a sector, because it's going to be really bad." ■

Socially Distant with Susan Calman



Red Sky Productions

The calm amid the storm

Matthew Bell discovers how making quick-turnaround shows is helping Glasgow indie Red Sky to keep its head above water

Socially Distant with Susan Calman has been bringing some much-needed cheer to Scottish audiences every Thursday since the early days of the coronavirus lockdown.

But the six-part topical comedy show for BBC Scotland – filmed in the Glasgow comedian’s back garden, with virtual contributions from comedians, actors and musicians – has also given a huge boost to its producer, Red Sky Productions.

“We were facing some pretty bleak times,” says Jane Rogerson, co-founder of the Glasgow factual indie. “We’re only three years old and don’t have massive financial reserves. A month ago, we knew all our productions were going to stop and, if our productions stop, our cash stops. So we had to think hard about how to survive.”

Red Sky pitched *Socially Distant with Susan Calman* to BBC Scotland shortly before the UK entered lockdown. “It went from pitch to

commission in seven days – and we were on air 10 days later,” Rogerson recalls.

The show is filmed in Calman’s garden by one camera operator – at a socially responsible distance – in half a day, just two days before transmission. “We took a decision with the BBC right at the start that we were going to lean into the lo-fi, rough and ready nature of it,” says Rogerson. “If it rains, Susan gets an umbrella out.”

Apart from the camera operator, the rest of the

production and post-production team work from home. “We have a morning Zoom meeting for everybody to check in – it’s really important for everyone to feel they are still part of a team,” says Rogerson. “We’ve been very mindful that it’s not business as usual for freelancers.”

Calman is an increasingly popular presence on television. Currently, she can also be seen presenting BBC Two’s *Great British Menu*.

Red Sky picked up a second commission for a quick turnaround show, this time from Channel 4. *Spring at Jimmy’s Farm*, a series of four one-hour programmes transporting viewers to the rural idyll of Jimmy Doherty’s Suffolk farm, began its run at the end of last month.

“We were already working with Jimmy on another series for Channel 4 [*Can Jimmy Save the Bees?*] and so we jumped at the chance to film at his farm during lockdown,” says Ross Harper, joint MD, with Rogerson, at Red Sky.

“We worked hard to get the right measures in place to film safely, including providing camper-van accommodation for each of the crew on location. The project went from commission to filming in less than a week and to air three weeks later.”

The Calman and Doherty shows have brought Red Sky “salvation”, admits Rogerson. The indie had seen a couple of series postponed and others, which, after months of development, were about to be green-lit, paused.

But, she adds, it has been an exciting time making shows on the hoof. “It’s like the old-fashioned way of making telly. You’ve got be

quick, decisive and clear, and take the team along with you. At one point, the future looked pretty bleak but [with these productions] we’ve been able to give work to 30 freelancers – that’s been really uplifting”

The lockdown, which has led to the cancellation of almost all shoots, has hit Scotland’s production sector hard. Its biggest drama, the BBC One/ITV Studios cop show *Shetland*, has been postponed, which has had a huge effect on the country’s TV freelancers.

“Indies are struggling and we’ve all taken pay cuts to protect our staff, but I really feel for freelancers who are being hit hardest,” says Rogerson.

Help for producers has been announced by Screen Scotland, which is offering TV and film indie development grants of up to £50,000. “This funding will support Scotland’s film

and TV producers and writers to develop high-quality, commissionable projects, ready to go into production when the market returns,” says Isabel Davis, Screen Scotland executive director.

Red Sky also has development money from broadcasters for a couple of projects, which can hopefully go straight into production when the lockdown eases.

Rogerson admits that, without more commissions, it “would be tricky” to survive a long lockdown. “And it’s no great secret that the commissions that are being ordered by every channel are not high-price ones, nor are they long runs.”

Nevertheless, she adds: “We’re a creative industry, so challenge can bring creativity.” ■

**‘WE WERE
FACING
SOME
PRETTY
BLEAK
TIMES’**

Susan Calman on her new show

■ ‘I was first contacted about the possibility of filming a show from my home in the middle of March and was immediately taken by the possibilities.

‘I thought about colleagues who’d suddenly found themselves without work. If we could get a show up and running, we could create employment and keep the industry going, even in a small way.

‘I was also deeply concerned about those in the creative community who found themselves unable to make money and who had ideas that needed to be expressed and appreciated.

‘Most importantly, I thought about those at home. My neighbours, my family, my friends, who were as anxious as I was and who found themselves, at times, extremely lonely.

‘Not everyone is on social media and television has such an important place in providing comfort in the current environment. Maybe we could do something to cheer people up, to make them smile and give them

something to look forward to?’

‘The idea very quickly became a reality as BBC Scotland acted decisively and committed to six episodes. We had no set dressing in my garden (as you can clearly see!), we embraced the lo-fi conditions and had one cameraman who stayed very far away from me at all times.

‘I fashioned an autocue from my iPad and stole a table from my sitting room. My Asda garden furniture also came in very handy.

‘But we did it, despite all of the challenges.

‘Technology meant that we could write, communicate and get a show together without being in the same room. The team at Red Sky have been magnificent and audience feedback tremendous.

‘The tone of the show changes each week but it always has the same aim – to showcase great Scottish talent (on and off screen) and to provide laughter, warmth and a bit of joy. I’ve never been prouder to work on a show.’

Weekly webinars help bursary students

■ UK production company All3Media has been helping RTS bursary students to find internships, work experience and jobs. Now, with the coronavirus crisis, it is providing extra support through a series of “weekly Wednesday webinars”.

All3Media head of talent Anouk Berendsen and talent manager Tamara Durnford are running the Zoom sessions.

The duo have been offering advice and practical solutions to a range of questions and concerns about students’ studies or career aspirations. Sessions are interactive, with six to eight students per webinar.

In these uncertain times, many RTS bursary students have had to cope with their worlds being turned upside down. Being forced to stay at

home and stare at television screens is a bittersweet experience for students longing to see their own names roll down the credits.

Bursary student Charlie McMorine, who took part in the inaugural All3Media session, said: “The session was extremely helpful and insightful; it gave me peace of mind knowing that it’s not just university students

feeling overwhelmed during these uncertain times. It really feels like we’re all coming together.”

The RTS is planning further sessions. ITV Studios hosted one webinar at the end of April and Dave Castell from global tech company The Trade Desk will be talking to technology bursary students in late May.

Megan Fellows

Northern Ireland Film-makers from Ulster University excelled at the RTS Northern Ireland Student Television Awards, winning four of the prizes on offer.

Phoebe Long, John Hannon, Jakub Bojanowski and Jack Creaner were awarded the Animation prize for *Cosmic Echoes*, which the judges commended for its “beautiful design of character”.

Margaret Mackel received the Factual award for *A Love Letter to My Mum*, a “fantastic, endearing story using a personal subject”. The Short-Form prize went to Marie-Louise McKenna and Caoimhe Lennon for *In the Now*, “a beautiful film, loved by all the judges”. Ulster University students also picked up the Craft Skills – Camera award for *Lost Memories*.

The ceremony was due to take place in late March, but was cancelled due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Belfast Metropolitan College won the Comedy and Entertainment category with *Crème Brûlée or Chocolate Soufflé?*, while the Northern Ireland Film and Television School at the SERC campus, Bangor, took the Drama award for *Circle*.

The News award, a new category this year, went to a team of students from



Cosmic Echoes

Ulster University

Ulster bags prize haul

North West Regional College for *Voices of the Border*.

“This year’s entries all displayed very high standards of creativity, innovation and technical capability and I know the judges had a difficult task selecting our

winners,” said RTS Northern Ireland Chair Vikkie Taggart.

The RTS Northern Ireland Student Television Awards were supported by Northern Ireland Screen. Head of education Bernard McCloskey said: “These awards are a great

way to nurture and encourage the fantastic creative talent we have in Northern Ireland.”

Carson McDowell, Stellify Media and Performance Film & Media Insurance sponsored the awards.

Matthew Bell

RTS Northern Ireland Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *Cosmic Echoes* - Phoebe Long, John Hannon, Jakub Bojanowski and Jack Creaner, Ulster University

Comedy and Entertainment - *Crème Brûlée or Chocolate Soufflé?* - Michael Murray Draine, Stacey Burns,

Jack Devlin, Ronan Karicos, Mark Hanna, Callum Russell and Dylan Kane, Belfast Metropolitan College

Drama - *Circle* - Marc McCabe, Samantha Davies, Stephen Parker and Lee Seales, NI Film & Television School at SERC, Bangor

Factual - *A Love Letter to My Mum* - Margaret Mackel, Ulster University

Short Form - *In the Now* - Marie-Louise

McKenna and Caoimhe Lennon, Ulster University

News - *Voices of the Border* - Brighid Sheridan, Michael Kane, Dionne Meehan, Darren Harkin, Daire Villa, Moya O'Donnell and Joe Kennedy, North West Regional College

Craft Skills – Camera - *Lost Memories* - Conor Barrow, David McIntyre and Tiaran Hatchell, Ulster University

Leroy Da Silva from the University of Coventry won the prestigious Sir Lenny Henry Award at the RTS Midlands Student Television Awards, which were announced at the end of March.

The Dudley-born comic and actor chose *Le Roi de la Forêt* (*The King of the Forest*) as the overall winner of the awards, adding, in a special message: "This really touched me and I thought it was incredibly well done."

Da Silva also won the Comedy and Entertainment and Craft Skills – Editing prizes.

This year, owing to the coronavirus outbreak, the awards were made during an online presentation streamed on the RTS YouTube channel.

Students from Staffordshire University led the way, with seven awards, including victories in the Animation (*St George and the Dragon*), Drama (*One-Eighty*), Factual (*Caffeine and Machine*) and Short Form film (*Night Hopper*) categories.

Three of these films – *St George and the Dragon* by Gus Kearns, Georgia Taylor's *One-Eighty* and *Night Hopper* by Lauren Burnham – also picked up prizes in the Craft Skills categories.

Alex Bridgewood from the University of Derby took the News prize for *Inked*, a film about the life of a tattoo artist. The final award, for Craft Skills – Sound, went to De Montfort University's Connor Snape for *Paranoia*.

"This year, the standard of entries was again very high.



Gus Kearns with his winning animation, *St George and the Dragon*

Staffordshire University

Staffs film-makers scoop up awards

To all the winners, nominees and entries, we send our congratulations on your work. The creative ability from our region shines through and we look forward to seeing all your work in the future," said Dorothy Hobson, chair of the judges.

BBC Birmingham, Film Birmingham and the University of Worcester sponsored the awards.

Matthew Bell

RTS Midlands Student Television Awards winners

Sir Lenny Henry Award-

Le Roi de la Forêt-Leroy Da Silva, Coventry University

Animation-**St George and the Dragon**-Gus Kearns, Staffordshire University

Comedy and Entertainment-

Le Roi de la Forêt-Leroy Da Silva, Coventry University

Drama-**One-Eighty**-Georgia Taylor, Staffordshire University

Factual-**Caffeine and Machine**-Sam Herdman, Staffordshire University

News-**Inked**-Alex Bridgewood, University of Derby

Short Form-**Night Hopper**-Lauren Burnham, Staffordshire University

Craft Skills – Camera-**Night Hopper**-Lauren Burnham, Staffordshire University

Craft Skills – Editing-**Le Roi de la Forêt**-Leroy Da Silva, Coventry University

Craft Skills – Production Design-**St George and the Dragon**-Gus Kearns, Staffordshire University

Craft Skills – Sound-**Paranoia**-Connor Snape, De Montfort University

Craft Skills – Writing-**One-Eighty**-Georgia Taylor, Staffordshire University

New chairs appointed in Wales and North West

■ New chairs have been announced at two RTS centres, Cymru Wales and North West. Former *Doctor Who* brand manager Edward Russell has taken over in Cymru Wales from Judith Winnan,

who served as Chair of the RTS centre for three years. "Holding our first industry awards in February has to be the highlight for me, as they were so well received and brought students and

professionals together in a real celebration of Welsh talent," said Winnan.

At RTS North West, *BBC Breakfast* editor Richard Freediani has replaced Cat Lewis, CEO of Nine Lives Media.

"I am really grateful to Judith and Cat for their dynamic and inspiring leadership while serving as centre chairs," said RTS Chief Executive Theresa Wise.

Matthew Bell

Davies warns of ‘great threat’ to TV

North West Centre

Russell T Davies warned of the severe problems TV faces in the wake of the coronavirus crisis: “There is a great threat to all broadcasters, everywhere.”

The writer was talking at an RTS North West online Q&A in late April. He recalled the 2008 recession, when friends at ITV told him, “We don’t know if we can show this episode of *The Bill* tonight,’ [because] they were so short of advertisers and money.

“This recession is going to be even bigger and it’s going to affect the commercial

channels hugely... and [the streamers] will start cutting back as well.

“We’ve got a Government that is morally and profoundly opposed to the BBC. Please don’t think they’ll change their minds about the BBC in this crisis.”

Davies’s latest project, Red Production Company’s *Boys*, about Aids in the 1980s, is in post-production and due to air on Channel 4 in the autumn.

During the lockdown, he said, “everything is doable online. The only part of the

process where people will have to move is ADR – additional dialogue recording. But it’s going to be quite simple to pop an actor in a car and get them safely to a studio.”

As a writer, he said, life during lockdown was “not very different. I’m lucky because I’m in that lull between projects, so I don’t have to think concretely.”

But, if he were writing a domestic drama, “it would be so hard to work out what life was going to be like in 12 months’ time. How do you

write about a family now? How can you be topical with the stuff you’re writing, because it’s all changing so fast?”

“The last thing I would want to watch now is a drama on lockdown, with everyone in isolation. Unless it’s very gay and sexy, I suppose – then I’d watch it.”

Rachel Pinkney produced the RTS event, which was hosted by Red Production Company’s LA Smith, and held in partnership with MediaCity UK and Red.

Matthew Bell



Babou Ceesay and Eve Myles in *We Hunt Together*

UKTV

through a lot more than his years suggest.”

At the same time, DS Lola Franks (Myles) and DI Jackson Mendy (Ceesay) are thrown together to investigate a high-profile murder.

The pair are opposites, which causes them to clash. This, plus Franks’ inability to deal with her own demons, could push them both to breaking point. Myles recognised that her character was in a “very vulnerable” place. “She is very cold and prickly and doesn’t want to connect with anyone.”

Mendy, though, is an optimist and of the opinion that no one is a criminal; people who commit crimes are always human beings first. “Jackson is there to ruffle every feather Lola has on her back,” said Myles, laughing.

On set, Ceesay clicked with Myles from day one: “Working with Eve has been one of [my] best experiences... if you don’t have that chemistry, the continuity doesn’t work.”

The UKTV event, to which RTS Futures members were invited, was hosted by DJ and presenter Edith Bowman.

Imani Cottrell

Alibi to air new thriller

RTS Futures

The first episode of new *Alibi* crime series *We Hunt Together* received an exclusive screening, followed by a Q&A with the main cast, via Zoom at the end of April.

Babou Ceesay, Eve Myles, Hermione Corfield and Dipo Ola discussed their roles in the UKTV original drama,

which is written by Gaby Hull (who also wrote ITV thriller *Cheat*). *We Hunt Together* sees the magnetic and intelligent Freddy (Corfield) meet vulnerable former child soldier Baba (Ola) and the pair form a deadly connection.

Corfield was drawn to the role because she saw a

“survival instinct” in Freddy: “She uses her attributes to get what she wants, she’s a hustler.” Freddy and Baba are drawn together. “He’s a dark soul, and she has this inner darkness, too,” said Corfield.

“Freddy comes along and she awakens something in him,” Ola explained. “They need each other... he’s been



Anthony McPartlin and Declan Donnelly with their Entertainment Performance awards at the RTS Programme Awards 2016

Richard Kendal

Steve Clarke hears how Midton Acrylics has switched from making RTS awards to protective visors for health workers

Turning trophies into ward wear

Anyone who's been to an RTS awards ceremony will be familiar with the work of Scottish firm Midton Acrylics, maker for these past 30 years of the Society's much-coveted and distinctive trophies.

As the coronavirus crisis deepened, Midton swapped making awards to manufacturing plastic visors to help protect health workers treating local Covid-19 patients.

The company has produced up to 600 visors a day from its factory in Lochgilphead, Argyll.

The visors have been sent to Oban's Lorn & Islands

Hospital and Mid Argyll Community Hospital in Lochgilphead.

"We wanted to do something to help the local community," explained Midton director Graham Ramsay. "There's a massive shortage of personal protective equipment [PPE]. We'd seen the plastic shields that provide complete coverage of the face on the news and thought we could make them quite easily from the stock we had in the factory."

A volunteer team of eight have laboured for free on the visors at the factory, which reopened on 1 April following the national lockdown and

staff being furloughed. Three prototypes were created within 24 hours, with the assistance of the hospitals and 4c Engineering in Inverness, before a final version was chosen.

The shields are free to the NHS because they have been financed by a crowdfunding campaign that saw local businesses and individuals raise £5,500 in a fortnight.

"We reached our original target in hours," said Ramsay. "The local community has been amazing."

An appeal helped source more of the plastic and elastic required to produce the visors – "People have been dropping [material] in at the factory gate."

The aim is to make around 20,000 visors a month – possibly rising to 30,000 if funds can be raised.

Midton plans to start manufacturing face masks and has also offered to make parts for ventilators.

"We're looking at going into production on 3D-printed face masks," said Ramsay. "Care homes are desperate for PPE. Ambulance crews

and pharmacies need protecting as well. We need to get back to making awards, but we're looking at how we can continue making PPE alongside our other activities.

"No one knows how long this is going to go on for, but I would say several months. We couldn't just sit and watch this crisis unfold on the news. We had to do something to help people, especially when we saw local hospitals struggle with the lack of PPE."

RTS CEO Theresa Wise said: "I am impressed and proud that Midton has pivoted its business to the manufacture of vital PPE. It is a wonderful example of British agility."

Midton is a global manufacturer of cast acrylics, and produces deal toys, acrylic embedments and memorabilia for specialist events.

Ant and Dec are just two of the celebrities who have received awards produced by the Lochgilphead firm over the years. Ramsay added: "Ant and Dec love their RTS awards and they had them in the background on *Saturday Night Takeaway*." ■



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