



The Yorkie bar kid

J. Friedmann

John Yorke

When the BBC announced two years ago that John Yorke had been appointed Controller of In-House Drama, Alan Yentob, the Director of Drama, Entertainment and Children's, said that the move would bring together all BBC England In-House Drama Production into a single department. Yorke would have special responsibility for continuing drama series and singles and would be joined by Kate Harwood, Executive Producer, *EastEnders*, as Head of Series and Serials. Diederick Santer was subsequently appointed Executive Producer, *EastEnders*, with additional responsibility for

developing younger-skewing drama series and serials. Nicolas Brown would join BBC In-House Drama in the newly-created role of Director of Drama Production and Sally Woodward Gentle would become Creative Director in charge of all development in the department.

Alan Yentob said: 'The new department will become the largest developer and producer of drama in the UK with the broadest range of output and best array of talent.'

So, two years later, *ScriptWriter* magazine asked John Yorke what it was like coming back to the BBC after being at Channel 4. ▶

John Yorke: Coming back was very exciting. Channel 4 is a fantastic place to work but you don't get to make very much. So I went from a team of eight people making 26 hours of drama a year to a team of about 300 people making 400 hours of drama.

Julian Friedmann: Didn't you find it more difficult to be hands-on when you suddenly had so much more drama to handle than you had at Channel 4?

JY: What was immediately apparent when I came back was that I could not be hands-on but actually that was a very useful thing to learn. What we have tried to instil in the last two years is that executive producers exec produce, producers produce, script editors script edit and writers write.

I think we have made three very interesting changes on the shows which I hope send a signal to the effect that the writers are at the centre and heart of all these programmes now, not the execs. There was an 'execocracy' that I think used to run these programmes and I do not think that is the case anymore. In fact, on *Holby City*, the entire show is run by a

writer - an incredibly experienced writer - Tony McHale, who is absolutely in charge of the entire direction of the show. On *EastEnders* we created a core writing group of twelve writers who each write twelve episodes a year and it is they who storyline the show every month. So again, it is their vision, it is the writers' vision...

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JF: That is similar to *Coronation Street*?

JY: Yes. I think it's closer to that. The BBC found itself in a slightly bizarre position where writers were actually excluded from the creative process and it was the executives doing the job and clearly that was unsustainable because writers are the life-blood of any show. Now it's tough on long-running shows because of continuity issues and because not all writers are as good as each other but unless you treat writers with respect and nurture and

encourage them, you're going to find yourself in a real hole eventually.

JF: So what you are saying is that you are allowing a group of writers to have much more hands-on control: you have your group of twelve, you have a writer running one show and you are empowering them by empowering people down the line. Have you had any comments or criticisms about the fact that by creating this - if you like - writers' elite, it is more difficult for other writers to get in?

It is easy to understand why a show with a good core team is much easier to run, will have a much higher consistency level, will not have crises such as scripts not being ready on time and so on, but the democratic access - or meritocratic access - into these must be lessened by giving more work to fewer writers. I think it is probably the most rational way to run this size operation but has there been any criticism that you are creating an elite?

JY: Yes, I think you get that from time to time and it is understandable. I think it is a meritocracy but I think that is how it works at its best; if you are good enough, then you'll get on the core team. We do not want people on the core team who are not doing the job properly so we will review this every year and we are bringing new people on board because that new blood is absolutely essential.

When I first arrived on *EastEnders* about fifteen years ago, it was a real honour to be one of the central team of writers and people fought for that place. I want that back again because you want there to be competition, competition judged on merit.

JF: For the new blood to get in, there seem to be primarily two ways: one is for someone to get into The Academy, the other way is to get on to *Doctors*. My personal view as an agent is that *Doctors* has been brilliant in taking people who really are new talent and nurturing them but it is now very difficult to get on to the programme because so many people are trying and in fact *Doctors* seems to be using quite well-established writers. It therefore seems that *Doctors* is following your idea of an experienced core team



Casualty, BBC

Without dialogue they'll get *rigor mortis*.

with writers of a certain calibre, when it's original brief was to be a way in for completely untried writers. I know many people are going to be wondering how they will get in if they cannot get in to *Doctors*. So how do *Doctors*, The Writers' Room and The Academy fit together for writers wanting to break in?

JY: There are a lot of questions there but I shall try to make it as simple as I can. The Writers' Room is basically the BBC shop window; that is where you come if you are a new writer. You go to The Writers' Room website and you receive all the advice you need on the best place to go, on how we can utilise your talent and on schemes for writers. So we work very closely with them and they pass on names to us.

With regards to *Doctors*, they are using the same writers a little bit more simply because it is a more manageable system but not just that. Recently Peter Morgan said: 'Writing is like a rusty tap ... a lot of muddy, crappy brown water has to come out before you get the clear blue stuff.' I think what *Doctors* is trying to do is give people more experience so they can write three, four or five episodes and really polish their craft before moving on to the more brutal world of *EastEnders*, *Casualty* and *Holby* and other shows. So it makes sense to me that we are not giving them only one commission and then allowing them to dangle. One of the problems we found on *Doctors* was that if you are a writer and you are writing just two episodes a year, you can't make a living and that means you don't know whether to give up your day job and all those questions.

JF: But I understand that there are writers with big track records writing for *Doctors*?

JY: There are a few, yes, but they largely do the big shop window episodes and it is still the starting point in the BBC for new writers. It is still where the new talent goes and in fact Peter Lloyd, the producer there, is about to start a trainee scheme for new writers based on a shortened version of The Academy specifically to bring new writers on to the show.

JF: When *Doctors* was started I believe that the BBC were also looking at doing a legal series in the same way. Are there any other plans for another precinct, other

than the GPs' practice and, given how successful *Doctors* has been, would it not make sense for the BBC to do another one, a different one?

JY: Yes it would make sense but the largest problem is cost. *Doctors* is great and incredibly cheap in drama terms but it's still expensive compared to half an hour of a quiz show so some of this will depend on the licence fee settlement. If there is more money for drama, then we can investigate such things because *Doctors* has proved to be invaluable to the BBC and a magnificent programme as well. So you never rule out doing new ones.

JF: How does a writer get into The Academy? Where do you need to be in your career?

JY: Basically I started The Academy two years ago when I came because I felt that there were a couple of problems. There was a shortfall of talent: we were not

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always attracting the best people to our shows and those we did attract were not always having the best time; it was sometimes quite an anguished process for a few people. So what seemed logical to me was to train people specifically to write those programmes, to make sure the programmes had a very clear format and to teach that format to the writers.

This is very much like the American system. Format is a still a bit of a dirty word over here but in America they embrace it and it seemed a sensible thing to do. There was a need and we are now in the second year. At the end of the first year, three of four writers from The Academy were about to join the writing team on *Casualty* so it has worked more or less.

JF: In terms of numbers, you have four major shows. What is the total number of writers who would be in the core teams of all four?

JY: Well, it varies. On *EastEnders* about twelve, on *Holby* and *Casualty*, probably

about four or five though you still have other writers as well because *Casualty* and *Holby* take much longer to write since they are longer shows.

JF: But if you are doing fifty episodes a year, how many writers would you like to use in a year?

JY: Well, I would like a situation where there are probably no more than fifteen on each show, which is about right because the lead time on those shows is about twelve weeks and you do not want it to be longer than that.

JF: To what extent have you been aware, perhaps by the increase in applications, of the effect of losing *Brookside*, *Crossroads* and *Family Affairs*? They roughly accounted for about 500 episodes a year and I have seen many writers suffer greatly because they relied on those shows. I think ITV is starting a new soap with Tony Jordan called *Moving Wallpaper* with *Echo Beach* as a spin-off series. Since there has been a sharp decrease in the total number of episodes and there have been the same number of writers, many are getting less work. Do you have a sense of that in terms of people

applying? Do you find people who had stopped writing for *EastEnders* and had gone on to other shows now coming back wanting to write for *EastEnders* again? Are more writers going for fewer slots?

JY: Yes, it has become more competitive but hopefully it's also more competitive because the programmes are more fun to work on and more exciting. There are fewer low-end dramas than there used to be. Is that a problem? It is to an extent because we have always employed people from *Family Affairs*, *Hollyoaks* and *Crossroads* so, yes, it is slightly more competitive but we have made a very considerable effort to bring new writers on board, much more so probably than in previous years.

JF: How do you select for The Academy?

JY: The selection process of The Academy is that we advertise every May in *The Guardian*, *Broadcast* and *The Stage*. It is a three or four, stage selection process but you can only apply if you have already had one work performed professionally which ▶

could have been on radio, theatre or television. We have a whole raft of people with different experiences and we take eight people a year. Initially we go through a sample of work and ask people to write something and then they come in to a very long workshop followed by an interview.

JF: How many people do you interview in order to select the writers?

JY: We probably interview about twenty five. On average, in the last two years, we had about 450 to 500 applicants. But when you say you are teaching writing, you can't in the end teach people to write when they have a voice. What we teach them on the course is structure - it is absolutely structure-obsessed - because that seems to be where the less-experienced writers struggle. Certainly by the end of the first year, what is lovely to see is that teaching them structure actually increases their ability to express their own voice, which is of course that you want; you don't

want clones, you want their voices.

JF: And what is the deal if you are selected by The Academy?

JY: You will have thirteen weeks in the classroom: for two and a half days a week you have lectures from me, then you have lectures from writers in the industry like Dominic Minghella, Tony Jordan, Ashley Pharoah, Matthew Graham and so on. They are all coming to talk. You also get

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the basics of costume, design and editing so it's a very holistic approach. We teach scheduling and about what happens to your script once you have delivered it: where it goes and why it's important you deliver your scripts on time and all those sort of things.

So you do thirteen weeks like that and

then write a final broadcast episode of *Doctors*, which, if it's accepted, is paid for in the normal way.

JF: And are they paid for the thirteen weeks?

JY: Yes, they are paid to be in the classroom so they don't lose out. If you write an episode for *Doctors* and if it's successfully broadcast, you then move on to the next stage of the course, which is that you spend three months on *EastEnders*, three months on *Casualty* and three months on *Holby* when you write an episode for each and of course you are paid for that. So it's a year's worth of experience. We pay for the scripts anyway so it is quite economical to run and everyone has delivered so far, which is lovely. They are able to practise and learn their craft which seems to be the most important thing, to be able to learn from making mistakes.

JF: And do you plan to keep running The Academy? Is it going to expand?

JY: We are going to look at possibly expanding it. We intend to run a mini Academy on *Doctors*, probably this year. I think one of the main justifications for the BBC is in-house training; it is something we can provide that is harder for Indies to provide and so we should. I would certainly like to carry on doing it because I love it and it seems to work. It's also been very useful for us because we have derived some great writers from it.

I can't expand it too much because I think it needs that one-to-one care. What is interesting is that we are just in the second year and we have a writer who has been working on the shows for a number of years. He is a very good writer, has fantastic dialogue skills but struggles somewhat with structure, which he was the first to admit. He came to me and said: 'I would like to do it,' which was brilliant because he didn't really need to, and he has been fantastic to have on board. It has taught him the principles of structure and he writes like a dream now. It's fantastic to watch that.

The second part of this interview will be in the May issue of *ScriptWriter*.



Spot the script doctor

Doctors: BBC