

John Yorke

John Yorke, the BBC's Controller of In-House Drama, continues his

JF: Can we talk about the plethora of new media options that are luring particularly the younger demographic away from television to socially interactive sites like YouTube and My Space? To what extent is your department thinking about how you compete for the audience's time? Are you going to be able to use drama connected to other forms of access like the Internet to try and draw them back and slow down the fragmentation of audiences? Is there going to be a brave new world and is drama going to change in the next five years as the world changes?

JY: Yes, the world is changing. People under thirty look at television as we looked at radio. One of the reasons why Mark Thompson has restructured the BBC is in order to allow for this kind of 360-degree commissioning. We look at every programme we now commission to see how we can exploit it on more than one platform. I think there will be a period of ten or fifteen years when we coexist with new media formats and then we shall have to see where everything goes after that. The BBC has been brilliant and at the forefront of exploring all these opportunities but the reassuring thing is that there is still a hunger for narrative and as long as people want to hear stories, in some way, shape or form, we should be able to survive.

JF: Is the demographic and ratings consideration more important for BBC1 than for the other channels and how important is it? Since you are not advertiser-dependent, does it really matter?

JY: That's a huge and complex question. Yes, of course, it matters. We want people to watch our shows and we have the duty to spend the licence fee wisely and judiciously so it is value for money for everybody. BBC1 is a mainstream, prime-time channel so you want people to watch it, and as long as it continues to take risks and be brave and

commission shows like *Life on Mars*, then it is fine. It is important to continue to be brave. I think if it were just a matter of ratings and the lowest common denominator, we would find ourselves in trouble, but I don't think we do that.

JF: I like *Life on Mars* but I don't think it is that different or brave. It has an interesting high-concept idea and is made in a classical way; it is good drama with an attractive vein of humour. In fact, I think it is the humour that makes it, but it is not that different or unusual or risky. *Shameless* was more risky in a way. It also survived and did well because of the humour but my impression is that actually there is very little risk-taking on prime-time drama. What would you say are the biggest risks you are taking?

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JY: Well, I was involved in both these programmes and I have to say they felt fairly risky gambles at the time. It's hard to imagine now but *Life on Mars* was turned down for eight years on the trot by various commissioning editors. No one wanted to make it because they said it was too risky.

JF: I think we can say that is not a surprise because most commissioning editors are conservative and some have gone on record saying they will not know what they want until they see it. Life is littered with hugely successful projects that were turned down by people who had little vision, but where is the risk in it? There are fantasy-based stories, science-fiction stories, time-travel stories all the time.

Doctor Who is a conservative show; it has been around for ... how many years? So someone travelling through time is not inherently risky.

JY: I think you are being unfair to commissioning editors. There have been some fantastic and brilliant ones. Broadcasting is fundamentally a conservative medium because it's a mass audience medium and if you deal with mass audiences, you need to tread very carefully. I think you also underestimate *Life on Mars*. At its heart it's not about time-travel at all; it is about how we police and what is the right way of policing.

JF: But there have been many cop shows which dealt with that which were more risky like *Cops*.

JY: But they were not done in such a stylistically brave and dangerous way. What you have here - and it is down to Jane Featherstone at Kudos and Matthew Graham who came up with it - is what we all aspire to in entertainment: a show that dares to be entertaining as well as being provocative. It is a show that it is full of thought and analysis and made with great care as well; it's a very intelligent prime-time show and with all due respect, because I thought it was brilliant, I think that's much harder than doing *Cops*.

JF: I agree that it has all those things and a huge tranche of humour and therefore I would still argue that it is not risky at all. What was risky was *Our Friends in the North*, which had a huge number of episodes and a rather lugubrious look at a particular aspect of politics. *Bleak House* was not really risky ...

JY: I think it was a big risk ...

JF: Why? The episodes were incredibly fast, there was brilliant casting, incredible pacing; the pacing, cutting and editing were exceptional. Okay, maybe I would have said

Part II

discussion with Julian Friedmann about risk-taking and the state of television drama.

there was a risk if I read an early draft of the script ...

JY: That is what the problem is ... the risk is in the commissioning far more than in the execution.

JF: I had a meeting recently with someone in development who had worked in Hollywood and when he came over to a job in London he was asked to name his ten favourite films. He listed them, they acquired the scripts and asked him to read them. He found that in some cases he almost couldn't read the scripts. He said that if he had been given the scripts, he would probably not have backed them. So there is a problem in reading and evaluating. Is Andrew Davies a risk? Some of his singles have not been hugely successful but on something like *Bleak House*, he is so mischievous and talented that it is not really a risk.

JY: I think again you are underestimating... We are talking bravery in broadcast terms. Surprising, maybe, but no one had had the idea of doing Dickens as a Soap opera in half-hour episodes. It's a big break with tradition and any break with tradition is a risk in television terms. You put it on straight after *EastEnders* and the danger - and it was a danger - was that we would alienate both audiences and fall down the hole in the middle.

JF: As a telenovella, which is a limited-episode Soap, perhaps it was less of a risk after *EastEnders*? I do accept, though, that there was some risk, so is the BBC going to do more telenovellas?

JY: Yes it is and more Dickens like that as well. What do you see as a risk?

JF: I think it is a risk doing message dramas and some of the event dramas are risky because the reason for doing them might not primarily be entertainment. I don't think *Lost* was very risky. I don't think *24* was very risky. They were imaginative but why must



EastEnders, BBC

They didn't say it was the Academy Awards.

one assume that deviating from a tired tradition is risky? In fact, the changes in the multimedia world, YouTube and the web and so on and the shortening of the audience's attention span, all suggest that those shows, with their fast intercutting and tremendous pace are the opposite of being risky; they are playing safe.

JY: I disagree. What you're saying is that because it's successful, the decision to commission it is a no-brainer, but that's just being wise after the event. Risk comes in embracing difficult ideas and allowing them to be expressed in a commercial form, not just in commissioning darker, more nihilistic pieces. What you have to remember is that every commission is a gamble; huge amounts of licence-fee money bet on something that now looks ▶

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He's not dead. He's just gone to ITV.

EastEnders: BBC

like a brilliant idea but then could have been a risk. For the people who make those decisions - not me, mostly Jane Tranter - their jobs stand or fall on those decisions.

JF: But you said the BBC has an obligation to take risks. If someone like Jane or yourself took a decision to do something that was different from what you have done before but which was trying to bring a younger audience who normally would not watch it to Charles Dickens, even if you make the wrong decision, you would still be applauded for having tried.

JY: Only so many times...

JF: Does it really worry you that a creative decision of yours could cost you your job?

JY: No, I think you follow your heart when you make creative decisions. I think you are always aware that if something goes wrong, it could really go wrong badly but sometimes that can be exciting. You can't afford to have too many failures, though, as a commissioning editor. That is the nature of the job: you will just be replaced and that is probably how it should be. Your job is to make the best television for the best possible audience. Those are the two controlling things. It's not - particularly on BBC1 - just about being radical. Many people watch BBC1 not to be exposed to a bunch of media people being 'radical' but because they want to be entertained.

JF: If there is a need to attract the My Space audience, the younger audience, how do you account for the fact that *Heatbeat*, which has to be one of the most old-fashioned shows, seems to manage to maintain such a high level of ratings? To what extent do you see the older demographic as an important target audience? Are you doing shows specifically for them?

JY: The audience on BBC1 is older and there is nothing wrong with that. They pay their licence fee, they should be catered for, but you're not just commissioning shows for them. We are talking about prime-time, mass-market channels: BBC1 and ITV1 that have to be all things to all people. So any commission that is not conservative on those channels is a risk because - as I said - the job of those channels is to be all things to all people, which is a much harder challenge than marketing for a niche audience.

You should also remember that risk is



How many doctors does it take to fix a script?

Holby City: BBC

relative to channel. Would it be risky to put *Bodies* on BBC1 or would it be stupid? Possibly the latter; the more radical ideas should go on BBC2, BBC3 and BBC4. There have been some fantastically brave, striking and wonderful programmes here. Just seeing something like *Shoot the Messenger* is like being punched in the stomach - it is not something you expect to see - and shows like *Bodies* are terrific. They are not audience-friendly shows but I absolutely defend our right to make them. So there are degrees of risk depending on which channel.

JF: But do you think *Bodies* is risky for that channel?

JY: Yes. In series television you get an audience back if you are reassuring. *Shameless* is the master of that; it is the most reassuring show of all. It's *The Waltons* with swearing and brilliant because of it. *Bodies* isn't reassuring. It is very, very dark and probably very, very true and that's brave. However the cost of being brave is, as Jed Mercurio, the writer of it, well knows, is that you're likely to get a small audience.

JF: Do you see family drama as one of the kind of holy grails because ITV1 is apparently developing it for the family audience? There are an increasing number of independent film producers who are now making family-oriented programmes connected to Saturday night, for example, *Robin Hood* has been recommissioned. So, are you looking for more family drama?

JY: The great thing *Doctor Who* rediscovered is that you can get eight or nine million viewers at seven o'clock on a Saturday night. Nobody thought that was possible. So yes, now it's been shown that the audience is there, the BBC obviously would like to have that slot. It's a very important slot and is the way to get young people watching television.

JF: *Robin Hood* has been getting about five or six million but presumably it cost a fraction of *Doctor Who*?

JY: Yes, *Robin Hood* is a much cheaper show but it is money well-spent. It is up against the *X Factor* - a very tough slot - but it did very well against it.

JF: Relatively speaking, has *Torchwood* done that well?

JY: Extremely. *Torchwood* opened incredibly strongly and in BBC terms was quite a brave show. For the first time in a generation we are making shows for that *Buffy* and *Angel* audience.

JF: *Buffy* is for the young adult audience. To what extent is that children's BBC? Where is the line drawn? Should writers be aware of that line?

JY: I think the line is about to be redrawn because for years there was a simple division between children's BBC and adult television. I think that's been put under the microscope since Mark [Thompson, the Director General] came back and there's a general acknowledgement that we need to make programmes for a young, teenage audience. Until now they've been a bit neglected. That's changing and quite rightly; in America it has led to some of the most creative programming of all.

JF: Can we now go to a rather technical question? My impression is that

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Torchwood, *Robin Hood* and *Doctor Who* are 42-minute long programmes. They have four Acts, the pace is tighter, there is slightly less plot, less padding and they are faster. ITV1's programmes are now around 48 minutes; *Torchwood* and *Doctor Who* fit into American television hours. Is there a conscious effort to make shows for which it will be easier to get either co-production partners from the States or a sale? And particularly now with the problems of advertising around children's programming, are we going to start seeing a more calculated approach to designing drama so that it will actually earn more money from abroad because there may be less advertising and it has to pay its way?

JY: You probably have to ask Jane Tranter that. I've certainly never had a conversation like that although if I were an Indie, I would be very aware of how I can get my money back and, of course, 45-minute shows are

easier to sell in that respect. The BBC is a slightly weird place in that we are stuck with hours most of the time because we don't have adverts and because the News moved as well. *Holby City*, which was a 50-minute programme, is now an hour. With all the repercussions that has had, I am not aware of any conscious move but obviously we live in a much more commercial age and we are encouraged to look at co-production possibilities, which is a good thing.

JF: In general, has the show-runner approach by the BBC on *Torchwood*, *Robin Hood* and *Doctor Who* with people like Ashley Pharoah, Tony Jordan, Dominic Minghella, Matthew Graham and others, been seen internally as a success? And are you planning to do more writer-led shows in the future?

JY: I think so. Our job is to get the writers' vision on the screen and the longer I do this, the more I believe it to be the case. It's clearly worked brilliantly on *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* and Dominic Minghella was fantastic on *Robin Hood* too. And let's not forget, *Holby City* is now run by a writer - the brilliant Tony McHale. To have a writer there all the time on set, getting that vision across, is great. I used to think it was a producer's medium but more and more it's becoming a writer's medium.

JF: To end where we began, is there a risk that more drama at the BBC in the future will be written by fewer people, which might be good for you in that you might get higher quality and consistency, but there could be fewer slots for new writers than before? And do you think that newer writers learn more by doing it in real-time and in real conditions than by studying how to write, making the Academy the way forward for the BBC to develop a 'writing staff'?

JY: As I said earlier, you can't teach writers to have a voice; the voice comes from within and it just develops naturally. In television drama, though, you can teach structure. The Writers' Academy that we run provides experience and there is no substitute for experience. Writers with vision and a voice and experience are what television drama needs.

JF: Thank you.