

Antony Wood

Head of Continuing Series, ITV in conversation with Julian Friedmann

ITV 1 and BBC1 are head-to-head in a ratings battle for the loyalty of drama viewers. Tony Wood talks about ITV's changing approach to writers, storylines, white boards and the multi-channel world.



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Julian Friedmann

JF Many people think BBC1 and ITV are now completely interchangeable and that there's much less distinctiveness than there was a few years ago. Like the Labour Party and the Tory Party, you're all going for the middle ground because it's safe.

TW ITV is driven by a commercial imperative. As far as we're concerned, bums on seats remains important and we are unashamedly populist in our approach.

JF Do you think that in long-running drama the BBC seems to have copied much of what ITV had proved to be successful?

TW Undoubtedly the BBC has interpreted the requirement for their licence fee as being giving the public what they want, that is one view of public service. But it's undeniable that there have been a whole host of imitative shows coming out of the BBC quite recently. *Born And Bred*, for example, could well have been an ITV show.

It's interesting to turn the question on its head and think about what we're doing and question whether we're making shows that are more traditional than the BBC shows. The

obvious example of that is the irony that last year there was a huge Sunday night ratings-battle between *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* on the BBC and *The Forsyte Saga* on ITV. It used to be the other way round.

JF And there was going to be a scheduling battle between *Zhivago* and *Deronda*?

TW Apparently so, but sensibly avoided. Quite whether it's entirely helpful to broadcasters for Andrew Davies to have a monopoly on classic adaptations is another question.

JF Are you happy with the way *Zhivago* has performed?

TW It's not done badly and it had pretty tough opposition with *Celebrity Big Brother* and something good on the BBC. In terms of talking about our approach and the BBC's approach to drama, I've always believed that the BBC's drama output should be the national theatre of Great Britain on television. There should be the opportunity to adapt great works of literature or works of social relevance to a standard and quality that

could not be seen elsewhere. I also believe that the BBC should be the home of material that is pushing the envelope of the genre. Whether it's doing that or not, you'll have to ask them.

At the moment we seem to be getting a certain amount of muted applause and are being seen to be taking a few more risks than the BBC are currently. In some respects *Zhivago* could be seen as a ridiculous thing to do. If there were any film that didn't need to be remade, I'd say it was that one. It came about because that particular group of people felt that there was something within the novel that they wanted to excavate. Whether you believe that that's been achieved or not is subjective, but it was an entirely laudable ambition, and for a commercial channel, very interesting.

I think *Bob and Rose* was also a rather interesting piece of drama. It was probably the most skilful piece of drama that has been on British television for a while, even though it didn't have a large audience.

JF It wasn't as big a risk as *Queer As Folk* (Channel 4)?

TW *Queer As Folk* could not have been made by a mainstream channel, certainly not in the current climate.

JF Is that not because the mainstream channels are running scared? ITV and BBC1 have the muscle. They could take many more risks than they are taking. There's very little evidence to show that such risks would fail, whereas there have been some shows, such as *Rescue Me* and *Stan The Man*, that were not risky at all and which failed. Was it because they didn't actually offer anything distinctive? In which case, where is the real risk-taking by either of the mainstream channels?

TW I think you have to look at the political circumstances. In the last couple of years ITV has been through – and we're not entirely through it yet – the most challenging period of its life given the virtual collapse of its revenue stream. We have to deliver to shareholders and playing safe is probably a reasonable response to what's been happening.

JF Is the failure to deliver to shareholders and the loss of that advertising revenue not in



some way, nevertheless, partly connected to the choice of programmes?

TW No. The loss of advertising revenue has been due to the fact that there has been a worldwide recession that has caused huge companies to cut their spending on advertising. I don't think it's necessarily to do with reach. I think it's simply to do with spend. And we have also had a new BARB panel that has brought things up-to-date, but it has adjusted our figures down.

We have a commercially-oriented BBC, which is new competition for us. We have a very challenging environment in terms of digital and multi-channel penetration, which again is new. Every evening 20% of the viewing public are watching multi-channel and that's a factor that didn't exist a few years ago when I started at ITV. On top of that, the worldwide recession was accelerated during the course of a single day eighteen months ago and all of these factors have meant that it's been extremely difficult for companies to maintain their spending.

I believe in improving standards of drama writing in particular, as well as drama production in this country. This is a creative profession and we have to challenge ourselves

continually. The only way that I can achieve anything is by getting people to watch shows. It's ridiculous that we should perceive a programme to be risk-taking because it's about a gay man. Actually people didn't come to *Bob and Rose*: it wasn't that they were bored with it; they just didn't come to it. That was its problem and since middle England is deeply conservative, there are serious problems with being innovative, particularly when you're operating within a mass medium like this.

JF The BBC have more than one channel and that gives them at least the potential to take risks because *Bob and Rose* on BBC2 or Channel 4 would probably have performed sufficiently well to be given another series. Can ITV have a late night slot, which is known to be for up-market, offbeat programming, or are you forced to be relentlessly down-market and populist?

TW I don't necessarily feel that populist and down-market have to equate to the same thing. I have to achieve returns on everything that I do. For me the challenge is in creating as innovative material as I can within those confines. We've had several attempts at playing material after the news and it's been very tough. We've not necessarily got it right and we will look at that again.

Our budget is around £200 million a year lower than that of BBC1 and that has made life difficult for us. We've been through a ▶

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period when we haven't been able to put out much new drama because part of our spend is at the time of transmission [an anomaly in ITV accounting practice], and we've had to play repeats for maybe the second time when we've had new material untransmitted on the shelves simply because the budget wasn't there. The problems that our shareholders have faced, not least with ITV Digital, has meant that money that could have been put into the main channel has gone elsewhere.

That situation has now changed. The recent figures for ITV1 have improved significantly because we can actually put out shows such as *Lucky Jim*. But I would not be happy doing this job if I felt that I was merely seeking to expand existing brands like the BBC's *Holby* and *Casualty*. We do have *The Bill* that transmits throughout the year and our two peak-time soap operas, but I think we need a varied diet.

Stan The Man may have failed, but nobody goes out to make a bad show. Yes, it was intrinsically conservative, but it was born out of a very real affection amongst the programme makers for the likes of *Minder*. Whether you feel it works or not is another matter and I'm not going to comment on that, but it was a passionate response, it wasn't a cynical response. I think there is an absolute lack of cynicism inside this building in terms of what we do but it doesn't always get across to the media.

JF You say you want to try to raise the standard so that the audience will follow. Can you talk about how this trickles down specifically to writers, script editors and storyliners. In other words, have you made changes on specific shows because you found things weren't working or because you think there are better ways of doing it? Every show seems to be run in a slightly different way, so what can writers and people in development learn from how you see that creative process?

TW I think there are two basic answers to that. First of all, if I were to speak directly to the writing community – and sometimes when I do, I find myself in trouble for it – there needs to be more of an acknowledgement of the fact that this is a business and writers generally need to be more in tune with the business of broadcasting, i.e. what they can and can't do, and what they can and can't sell. It seems to me that writing for television is like playing the piano. It's all very well to have the natural talent but you have to learn your craft just as you have to practise in order to become a concert pianist. There are exceptions: Mozart could do it by the age of four.

By and large, I think a writer improves the more writing they do and the more they understand the medium, understand the notion of television as a specific visual medium. It's not a training

ground for film. It has its own parameters. There are too many people in British television, in particular, who see it as a stepping-stone to making film and it isn't. It can be, but television is a very different medium from film. If you're writing for the large screen there are very different demands all the way along the line.

JF Given that the majority of people who want to write scripts, want to write for film, how would you sell television drama as something that might actually be more attractive and more interesting?

TW Well, firstly there is a chance that it might get made. Secondly, television at its best is a medium authored by writers. Film is not. Let me talk a bit about what I've tried to do here. When I came into this job I felt that *Coronation Street* had lost touch with its roots, so we have worked hard to return it to being a writer-led programme. It's become more in tune with where it was originally and it's doing much better than it was two years ago. It is also doing better than *EastEnders* and has been for some time. I think that's because people are writing from the heart, which I believe is immensely important.

JF What's the development process now on *Coronation Street*?

TW The writing team meets every three weeks and broadly speaking they hammer out enough material for three weeks' worth of stories. There are currently about fifteen in the team's core. After they've met, a small group of storyliners, who tend to be fledgling writers coming into television on the first rung, will work on the story documents. They'll work the narrative into an episodic format and then pass it back to the commissioned scriptwriters who will then each work on a script.

JF Are those storyliners more 'secretarial' rather than creative? Do they also come up with their own ideas?

TW They can do. The author of the programme is the conference and an idea is an idea, a good idea is a good idea. They work as a team in coming up with the shape of an episode. There are four or five storyliners working at that point so collectively they're learning about shaping narrative and then it's up to the experienced writer to accept or reject the storyline that they receive from the storyliners.

For *Emmerdale* it's exactly the same. *The Bill* is the most interesting for me currently in that when we decided to change it and

Did Jim fix it?



Lucky Jim: Working Title TV

brought in Paul Marquess, the feeling was that *The Bill* was failing from a commercial point of view because it was too disparate, that there was no continuity. Clearly there was no narrative continuity by and large. Equally there was little tonal or stylistic continuity between episodes and we perceived that as a problem since we were losing viewers. The core audience of *The Bill* had become relatively small and to justify the spending, it needed to be increased. It seemed that whenever we operated a serial story – for example the Beech story – viewing would increase.

JF How many episodes would that run over?
TW About twelve.

JF Did you do special marketing? Did you tell the audience in advance that there was going to be a longer story? Did the audience grow over the twelve episodes?

TW Yes it did. But there were two problems with that. First of all there was the problem of sustaining it and secondly, by marketing it as a special story of twelve, it was actually confusing to the audience in terms of the more natural definition of the programme. So what I wanted to do was to change the programme in order to encourage greater loyalty, while at the same time I felt it was important to have a set of narratives played to their natural length.

Since it was difficult to confine the storytelling within a single episode, I felt we were ending up with cat-up-a-tree stories. In other words, it was becoming inconsequential and the inconsistency of quality between episodes was a barrier to building an audience.

JF How much of that inconsistency of quality would you put down to writing and how much would you put down to the fact that the script editors, who had a different brief from the brief they have now, were actually not getting the best out of the writers?

TW I think it relates to that point I made earlier about everybody understanding what they are trying to achieve and understanding the broadcasting industry. The script editors would generally feel their loyalty to be to the individual writer with whom they were working. The writer would come up with a script and the editors would work on it for as long as it took in order to achieve the standard that the producer felt was acceptable. This could take up to a year perhaps and it was done in isolation with characterisation often only relevant to that particular story.



Lovable villains

Coronation Street: Granada

That seemed to me to be a reductive process. I thought *The Bill* needed to be about life in a London nick in 2002 or 2003 and how the coppers responded to events. I wanted them to grow as characters, to be in narratives that didn't simply end as soon as they caught the criminal and I didn't want the short cut to them catching the criminal.

The script editors in the old system would work on a given narrative that was originated by a particular writer, so there would be an emotional investment. Ultimately that wasn't necessarily the right thing for the whole show, with each producer feeling a certain amount of pride in the individuality of their work.

That doesn't work in a run of ninety-six episodes a year. There needs to be some level of cohesion.

I'd look at some of the episodes from a *Bohco* series, for example, in fact I'd look at many American series. I appreciate *Law and Order* is much more series than serial in that sense but the American series have enormous consistency of quality that I felt we weren't achieving.

So Paul Marquess was brought in to change the process, which he did. We reduced *The Bill* from four units to three and we centralised the storytelling, which was a difficult process for many of the writers. I think they felt that they were being removed from the inner circle creatively and to a

certain extent they were, to begin with, because we had to drive this through.

What we always said – and we said it openly to them at the time, whether anybody believed us or not is another issue – and what remains true, is that we wanted the writers to understand where the programme was going and to come up with long-form narratives for the programme. In the short term, we went sensationalist. We went a bit soapy.

JF Deliberately?

TW Very deliberately because we were losing ground to *Holby*. There was clear daylight between us at the time and the programme would not have survived if we hadn't done that. We've added 30% to the audience since February 2002 and that's significant. It's gone from a 21/22% share to averaging 10% higher than that. If we now drop below 31%, we are irritated.

It deliberately went somewhat soapy in order to attract viewers and we changed the aesthetic of the programme hugely, in the short term, fundamentally redesigning it. It was moved from being a fly-on-the-wall film about a cop show to an obvious piece of drama. It was important that the visual language of television was brought more into play so there was more mood lighting and more narrative shown visually.

We pretty much changed all of the aesthetic and went for a policy of casting ▶

people from soap operas whom we felt were capable of doing broader work than they'd done previously. We didn't go for stars but for the lesser-known faces from many soap operas. We wanted the viewers to feel familiar with these people but we didn't want it to be sold purely because of them. We drip-fed them in but didn't make the show reliant on them.

We involved the script editors much more than previously and moved to a more *Coronation Street* sort of editorial board process, if you like, with writers invited to take part. They were invited in all the way down the line, but many of the stories were coming from Paul.

We wanted to encourage the writers to become the creative heart of the programme and there was even a discussion at some point about taking writers on as staff because although we have a story team, much like the *Coronation Street* story team with script editors, the ultimate aim of the programme was to have writers storylining their individual episodes and we wanted a policy of complete transparency.

I think that ultimately what we would all like to achieve – and we're not there yet – would be a situation whereby within the course of a meeting we will hammer out, say, eight episodes with eight writers together with the script editors and producers for continuity.

JF So all those eight writers are in the room at the same story conference and they all know what each other's doing?

TW Absolutely. Everybody there. Ultimately I'd like to have a process whereby each individual writer with their given episode will storyline it on the white boards around the room, with the others chipping in. So essentially each episode is in fact storylined by committee. The mere process of standing there with that pen involves you in an editorial function and just the way that you write the sentence – and it should be a single sentence for each scene – involves choices.

Then I want that group to break up for a day or so in order to work on the scene breakdowns separately, but then to bring it back so that essentially the editing process takes place collectively by the writers and they become the heart of the programme, the

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authors of the piece.

JF This is in fact very much like the American model with the writers' room and the white boards, the difference being that there they're all paid a salary whether they actually write an episode or not. Here, presumably, they are still paid per episode rather than receive a salary. So this is a form of team development, rather than team-writing?

TW Yes, but the difficulty is the economics of it. You know how much these shows cost and you know how much of that budget you can spend on writers. It seems to me that rather than go through the Chinese whisper process of a group of people sitting down working out the idea, somebody else writing up the storylines and returning it to somebody else – which is a reductive process – in this case you have eight people who are the authors of the programme. They understand what everybody else is doing, it can be collaborative, but when they go off and write their individual scripts, they will tend to do that on their own.

JF The economics of development in this context seem to me quite straightforward and I don't see why it should be a problem because most writers who were privileged to be in that group and – I suspect – their agents, would not be averse to being told that they would each receive one-eighth of the treatment payment for episodes 101-109 and each of them would be allocated a script.

TW What's been interesting – and we're only part of the way there – is that when we first discussed writers coming on to the staff, a number were reluctant to do so and that's why we don't have any as staff. However, we've found that these group meetings are becoming increasingly more frequent, and the white boards and the meeting rooms are being used by writers even when we're not calling them in. The net effect has been that the quality of the storytelling has improved and has become much more politicised.

The basic thrust of the programme is about the difficulty of being a copper in the Metropolitan force now and much of that has

to do with issues of race, of political initiative, of political and governmental pressure and so on.

The level of research for the programme has shifted up a gear. It's more commonplace to be talking to controversial figures within the Metropolitan Police now than before, and certainly the Met's own PR brigade have started to sit up and take notice and are, to a certain extent, concerned by what we're doing. I think that isn't simply because we're operating a sensationalist policy. There was the gay storyline that became a remarkably sophisticated story and an interesting piece of television. That was a direct result of challenging the writing team more than having them sitting at home working on individual crime stories. These are stories of social relevance.

The most frequent note delivered over the last six months of the last year was 'cut the first act'. Literally, just lose the first act. That's a cry that's not heard so often these days. We're now telling stories that are much bolder, that are faster on the feet and that don't need to be over-explained. It's a very interesting process. Equally, the writing process is coming much closer to the cutting room. The writers are more aware of this as a visual medium and are no longer left out of the loop as far as casting is concerned. They're aware of creating character for individual actors and finding individual actors for those characters. It has become a much more pro-active experience.

As you know, we've moved that process on by diversifying into *M.I.T.* (Murder Investigation Team) and by bringing Carson Black into *The Bill*. Carson's success with *Doctors* has been built entirely on good scripts. He makes the writers work harder than they want to and generally this results in better scripts than those writers had achieved before.

Broadly speaking, that's what I'm trying to apply to everything that I'm doing at ITV because I think, to bring this right back to your original question, that if we want to take risks, we have to take them from a position of absolute confidence in creating popular, long-form drama.

In the next issue of *ScriptWriter* Tony Wood looks at the future of long-running drama on television

Coronation Street had lost touch with its roots, so we have worked hard to return it to being a writer-led programme.