

Channel 4
Drama
5 September 2007

Opening Remarks

Stuart Cosgrove

Director, Nations and Regions, Channel 4

I. Preamble

Good afternoon everyone. It is lovely to see such a good turnout. For those of you who do not know me, I am Stuart Cosgrove, Director of Nations and Regions here at Channel 4, overseeing our production and our work outside of London. Many of you will know that I have been around Channel 4 for longer than Carol Vorderman and it is good to have such a good turnout of producers here today.

II. A Successful Year

At Channel 4, it has been, as you know and I think the media have described it as an *annus horribilis*, a horrible year; this is to do with the consecutive scandals around *Celebrity Big Brother* and then, as it were, the phone competition issues. Curiously enough, when big issues like that hit the headlines there is a tendency for the over-determination of those one or two stories to maybe disguise the type of year that Channel 4 in fact has had. It has been an extraordinarily successful year, one of the most successful in Channel 4's history and I will tell you a little more about that later. However, clearly it has been a year when television itself has come under quite significant cultural challenges, not least the so-called fake documentary scandal. For producers in the audience there is an obvious solution to that, which is to move the entire budget of documentary and factual and place it into drama and fiction. That gets rid of the problem with a simple clap of the hands. It may not happen, but we are working on it. However, our documentary team, as you would imagine, are slightly resistant to the idea.

What we are going to do today is focus on drama and we are doing that against a backdrop of quite significant challenge and change across British television. First and foremost, has been Channel 4's growth from a single channel to a portfolio group of channels, with E4, More4 and, of course, Film4 all on Freeview and all playing now a really significant part in our success. It used to be the case that Channel 4 perceived itself as being somewhere like a 10% channel and that was one of the great benchmarks we used to look up to in the mid-1990s when Channel 4 was a standalone channel. Now, Channel 4 is much closer to reaching 13%, much more than 10% of the British population, so curiously enough, at the time when the perception is that Channel 4 would be in decline, through our portfolio share we are increasing in importance.

III. Cultural Changes

There are big challenges ahead, of course, but we are also looking in the multi-platform era at a whole range of other cultural changes. One of the big changes that has been brought about not just by shows like *Big Brother* but a whole range of different shows is the way that the genres, which in one era in television were fairly distinct, separate and had clear delineation, now borrow, beg and steal off each other. There is much more cultural cross-pollination across the genres, much more transgression. It used to be in the glory days of drama documentary that that was perhaps the only transgression on British television and caused so much trouble because of that. Now, I think every genre is looking to other genres to borrow from.

IV. Creative Renewal Programme

1. Engaging with Smaller Companies

Channel 4 has announced a creative renewal programme. That sounds like a grand idea and probably is one of those things that you think 'I am not sure I entirely believe what this man is saying.' Well, let me talk about what the creative renewal projects we are working on consist of. We are doing a very big internal rethink about Channel 4 in the future. It is a big piece of vision work in which all the top executives and managers at Channel 4 are involved and already some of the early announcements have come out. At Edinburgh, Julian Bellamy, our Director of Programmes, announced that 20% of our commissioning from now and in the foreseeable future will be ring-fenced for companies with a turnover of less than £2 million. That is quite a remarkable statement of intent in terms of our willingness to engage with new companies, start up companies, small companies, and producer/director-owned companies. This is against the backdrop of the presumption, I think, often in the minds of both producers and other television rivals that aggregation of television to the bigger companies, to the super-indies would mean inevitably that television would move to a smaller number of bigger suppliers. Channel 4 clearly has a vested interest in trying to challenge that certainty and try to bring innovation back into the mainstream of our work. The area I manage is outside the M25 area and that is an important part of the creative economy in the main cities outside of London; £150 million a year of investment in programmes.

2. New Technology

In addition, part of the renewal is new technology platforms, which we can talk about a little bit later through Drama as well:

- Our Video on Demand platform, the first in British television where you can download, watch and own programmes as you choose to suit your needs.
- 4Docs, the first broadband channel in Britain for the uploading of creative documentaries, which is a great site.
- 4Laughs, which is a user-generated comedy site.

Thus, using the internet, broadband and IPTV much more eloquently than perhaps we have been able to do in the past.

V. Introduction to Drama Team

That is the broader picture. We are here today to talk about drama and it is a period even of change in Drama. I think that would be the best way to put it, because Luke Alkin is the Acting Head of Drama since Liza is off on maternity leave. I like the 'Acting' bit, in drama those two things should go together, so I will be asking him to make his speech in various different acting traditions, in the Elizabethan tradition, in the Stanislawsian tradition or whatever, as we go on. We also have Sophie, who is Acting Commissioning Editor, Series, and Robert Wulff-Cochrane, who is the Senior Development Editor. They are new inasmuch as they are not new to drama, but new to the roles in which they are currently acting, but that is always a good thing, I think, in life, because fresh eyes, fresh attitudes and fresh minds are what Channel 4 was based on as well.

Without further ado, I am going to ask Luke to lead us off and then I will act as question master.

Drama

Luke Alkin

Acting Head of Drama, Channel 4

I. Introduction

Hello, everyone. As Stuart has already said, I literally started today: Liza went off on maternity leave yesterday. I think I am up to speed with what Channel 4 drama is about. I will be working closely with Sophie and Robert. I think the 'acting' part is key; we are aiming to have as much continuity with what Liza has been doing and obviously she will be coming back, so we will be working with Liza and in communication with her.

II. Commissioning Schedule

1. Series

The broad brush strokes of what Channel 4 is looking for as far as drama is concerned are to do, from 2009, four six-part series a year and between seven and eight single films or events per year. The series, broadly speaking, are for the 10 o'clock slot weekdays and Julian Bellamy has been quite clear about the kind of dramas that work in that slot. He describes them as being subversive fun. If you think of past successes in that slot, *Shameless*, *Teachers*, *Queer as Folk*. He is very clear about what works in that slot and so we are very clear about what we are looking for. We have a big impetus to find material and, for us, four dramas is going to be a lot to make, so as I say, we are going to be going out to find the right projects for that slot.

2. Single Films and Events

The 7-8 single films and events will be less ratings-driven event pieces, which should be challenging, provocative, debate-engendering, authored pieces that are contemporary and relevant to today.

3. Response Time

As far as how we work goes, we aim to turn things around very quickly and give quick responses. As I say, I have only been here a few days, but I am already genuinely struck by that aspect in comparison with the BBC which, as you have probably found out, can be unbelievably slow and bureaucratic. We aim to give clear and quick answers on things and be supportive and very open with you. Robert will be very much across everything that comes into the department and is the real continuity, because obviously Sophie and I are acting in our roles. Sophie will now discuss what we are looking for at E4, as that is one area that I feel I am not up to speed with yet.

Sophie Gardiner, Acting Commissioning Editor, Series, Channel 4

4. E4

At E4, we are looking for another series. We have *Skins* already, a new one called *Nearly Famous*, which is starting to air in November, but we are looking for something else. Due to the existence of *Skins* and *Nearly Famous*, which is Kudos' modern-day *Fame Academy*, we are looking for something that stands very separate from those; probably not a group of teenagers in a school-type situation. We are thinking maybe a big genre piece or something like that. E4 is cheaper; you get less money for it, but it is a good channel and we are actively looking for a new series there of six hour-long parts.

Stuart Cosgrove

Is there anything that you wanted to say at this stage in terms of first thoughts??

Robert Wulff-Cochrane, Senior Development Editor, Drama, Channel 4

III. Development Process

Regarding the development process here, as Luke says, we are trying to be responsive and reactive to any submissions we receive. We are happy to take submissions at any stage of development, whether people want to send us single lines, single pages or scripts. In many ways, we are finding it is easier for us to give people answers in terms of whether it is an area we are interested in or whether it is an area we already have covered. Sometimes it is quite helpful to have a very early conversation rather than let people go down a long development route.

In terms of the way our development works, it is pretty standard. We are very keen to work with new talent and are constantly looking for ways to work with that new talent, whether that is in writing or directing. However, one thing to say that is quite important is that we are very keen to get these four big new series off the ground. Where we will be looking at new talent for the single films, in series terms we are hoping to let people who have series experience, not necessarily people who have already authored series, but certainly people who have an understanding of the

way that series work, to let those people step up. Indeed, if we are very honest, I think we are less likely to take a punt on very new or very young talent there.

Stuart Cosgrove

Thank you very much. From what we have heard in terms of the development and the available slots you can see the point I was making about the portfolio channels. That if you were to forensically analyse Channel 4 and its success, it has been successful through different but connected audiences, one of which would be a young, smart, new British contemporary audience; the other of which would be an older, more up market and relative cerebral audience. With those two, if you call them 'pop and posh' or 'young and smart' or however you define them, it is very clear that our drama resonates there. *Skins* is clearly a huge success for E4 and touches that younger audience very dearly, whereas *Longford* or *The Mark of Cain* or *Shameless* or whatever are clearly things that work within a Channel 4 context or a More4 context. Thus, there is a lot to be talked about as we dig deeper into that and get at the granular detail, but as they always say, when in doubt show a tape, so let us have a look at a tape of our recent drama output.

[Video shown]

Questions and Answers

Stuart Cosgrove

If I could start with you, Luke, and ask when you look at the drama output, what are the things that most immediately spring to mind if you are talking to somebody who is a producer? What are the key messages you want to give?

Luke Alkin

As I said before, if we are talking about series, that trailer for *Shameless* is fantastic. I had not seen it before and it does encapsulate what Julian seems to want for that slot, which is obviously not a clone of *Shameless*, but that kind of edgy, identifiably Channel 4 programme that is funny, irreverent, entertaining, has characters with whom you want to spend time. Identifiably Channel 4 but at the same time, entertaining and enjoyable.

For the singles and events, the Peter Kosminksy film, *Brits*, which is transmitting in the week of the anniversary, is a very good example. I think it is going to be very controversial, but it is incredibly hard-hitting. It is going to be debated, I think, a great deal, but again, talking about issues that are incredibly relevant to British society in a way that is incredibly dramatic but also thematically very rich. Obviously, you could say the same about *Mark of Cain* and Rowan Joffe's film, *Secret Life*, about paedophilia. Indeed, the next block of films that we have coming up that are green lit I think are in a very similar mould, dealing with contemporary subject matters but in a way that is entertaining and hard-hitting for audiences, but not ratings-driven; more about debate and defining the Channel.

Stuart Cosgrove

I know there is no simple answer to this, but it is worth getting your perspective on it. When a producer comes in to talk to you about things, are you motivated, as it were, by the broader subject, the theme, the idea, the central organising principle of the drama, early drafts of the script or by the talent that is attached? What motivates you? What is the thing that would make you think 'this is something I really, really want to pursue?'

Luke Alkin

In an ideal world, it would be at the first stage. It would be a subject matter that perhaps we had not thought about tackling or a subject matter that we had thought about tackling, but that is going to be done in an interesting and new way. At the same time, we will be looking at which writer is potentially attached. Obviously, if an idea is particularly strong and does not come with a writer attached to it, that would not preclude us wanting to go with it, but ideally, you are going to have an exciting writer who is going to be coming with an interesting idea. Later on down the line, we will obviously be pushing for the best actors, the best director, but it really springs from the idea and the treatment of that idea.

Stuart Cosgrove

I wonder if it is the case as well that maybe for all Channel 4 drama historically, contemporaneity has been one of the big driving principles. Currently, as we saw on the tape, there are themes such as the war in Iraq and the so-called 'war on terror' and those issues have recurred; a couple of years before that, there were the vanities of the Blairite era and so on. Do you feel that you think thematically about the kind of output? Do you say, 'Well, these are issues that are so much in the public consciousness that we need to dramatise them?'

Luke Alkin

Do you mean do we start with thinking about subject matters?

Stuart Cosgrove

Yes.

Luke Alkin

I would not really say that. There are certain film-makers, for example Peter Kosminsky, who will be thinking in that way and will come and say, 'This is something that I am interested in dealing with', but I do not think we would be that prescriptive. However, at the same time, if you have an idea that feels right, it will be because you can identify why it is in the public consciousness and why, in turn, it is going to be debated in the press and why it is going to stand up for itself and cause debate.

Sophie Gardiner

Even in the series, even within subversive fun I think we do still ask the question 'Why now?' when you look at the stuff that we have done. It is not going to be about the war in Iraq, but there

has to be a reason why you think this has to be made now, it does tell us something about the way in which we live today, even if it is done in a fun *Shameless* or whatever sort of way.

Stuart Cosgrove

Robert, you might have a thought about this. Clearly, producers are in the business of trying to sell ideas and bring projects to you and so on. What is the big turnoff? What regularly comes in that is just simply not Channel 4?

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

We get a lot of stuff where people say, 'We have taken this to the BBC and ITV and they were not interested in it, so we are bringing it to you.' I think we are often the third port of call for producers.

Stuart Cosgrove

So you feel a script has done the rounds.

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

Yes, absolutely, and generally with those ideas they have been developed for another channel and the chances are they are not going to therefore fit what we are looking for, because one of our biggest questions is what makes this distinctly Channel 4. Therefore, to be told it has come from another channel blows that out of the water in the first instance.

Stuart Cosgrove

It is a bit of a turnoff, is it not? Is there derivativeness?

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

No, not at all. The important thing about what we are trying to do, particularly with our singles slate is that we are not particularly interested in pure drama. Much of the time we will get a great project that comes to us from a great writer with a great producer attached, but the question is what are you trying to say with this piece and with each of those pieces I think it is very clear: the writer has set out with an opinion that they want to express, for better or worse. I think *Clapham Junction* is a very good example of a film where a lot of people, the gay community and many journalists took offence. They felt it was miserable, it was not celebratory, but the truth was that it came to us from a writer who is one of this country's major gay playwrights and it was his very distinct voice that was coming through. When people said to us, 'But why?' the answer was because this is the story he wanted to tell. We would not have dared censor him and try to make him tell the story we want, but he wanted to tell that story now.

Stuart Cosgrove

I was wondering also if you could help us out. *Skins* is a very good case in point where, firstly, it has been a hugely successful series, but I am also intrigued by the way in which in very modern

ways it is starting to use Facebook, websites and things like that as part of its creative culture context. Can you talk a little about that?

Sophie Gardiner

Apart from the fact that I think *Skins* is brilliant, there are two defining things about it as a series. One, Brian Elsley, who writes it with a team of other writers, is an established, brilliant writer who has run a writers' room with some much, much younger talent and really brought them on through, to the extent that there are 17 and 18-year olds writing little platforms for the web. The ambition is that they will be writing an episode next year. We have one in this season; he is 18 and has written a really good script because of Brian's show-running capacity and ability. Not every writer would be interested in doing that or would have the talent to do that, but when they do it is brilliant and it works excellently. I think that has given *Skins* its voice.

The other side, which is not unconnected with that, is to do with its online presence. I do know now how many of you are aware, we had a big secret party this time for *Skins* where on YouTube people who were in the *Skins* gang were invited and thousands came to Bristol. It became part of a 10-minute thing that has been on YouTube ever since and is going to get an airing on E4. There is a huge constituency around *Skins* and they have been brilliant company in generating ideas, having real imagination about how to make that work. I think it particularly works with a teen audience, because it shows it enormous respect for a teen audience, it is not to be taken for granted and it is not to be patronised. Consequently, we have 16 and 17-year olds regularly coming to the meetings, having their input. That is why I think *Skins* works for teens, a combination of those two.

Stuart Cosgrove

Yes and beginning to redefine how drama is written –

Sophie Gardiner

Totally, yes. It is a very exciting, scary process.

Stuart Cosgrove

I was wondering if there are any questions from the audience. I will set up one that is always too embarrassing to ask, which is about money. I take it there is money and that you do pay people. What kind of money are talking about here? I guess every script has its own idiosyncrasies, but what would be a ballpark figure for a tariff price for a drama at 10 o'clock?

Sophie Gardiner

For E4, it is quite simple for the series: 450 an hour; for Channel 4 it is 650 an hour.

Luke Alkin

With events, it starts at 1.2 and goes up to around 1.9. Obviously, with events and series there is always the potential for co-production as well, if more money is needed. As far as commissioning writers and development are concerned, it depends upon who the writer is and what deal you can do with their agent.

Stuart Cosgrove

Presumably, they are also significant seasonal launch pieces that have a pre-eminent place in the Channel 4 schedule, often are also helping More4 form its identity as well.

Sophie Gardiner

Also, what they are beginning to do now with scheduling those one-offs is often doing programming around them. For instance, I know for *Brits*, because they are expecting it to be controversial, they are doing what they did after *Clapham Junction*, which is putting a debate programme after it to help bolster up those individual programmes within the schedule.

Stuart Cosgrove

That is great for the context, but let us see if the audience wants to ask anything.

Participant

Could you give an indication of [inaudible].

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

Nothing in series. In singles, we have just green lit our three films for the start of next year. There is *Fallout*, by Roy Williams, which was a play from the Royal Court and is another very exciting piece because it is Roy's first big piece of authored television. It is about young black gang crime. Then there is *Poppa Shakespeare*, which Sarah Williams has written, which is much more comedic than most of our singles and explores the mental health system. In addition, there is *Hurndall*, who was the young British photographer who was shot by the Israeli Defence Force in Gaza. The story is told from the point of view of his parents and the reason we have told that story now is because it is an interesting way to explore the whole Israeli-Palestinian conflict but as told through British eyes.

Stuart Cosgrove

There are opportunities beyond that, clearly, and I expect you are now looking for the next batch of those.

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

Something interesting to say about *Hurndall* is that we often get pieces offered to us that are set abroad and I think generally we need that British angle to a piece if we are going to consider making it. It is very hard for us to make a really brilliant film about two young Afghan children. We are pitched a lot of that stuff and, unfortunately, much as we would love to do that, it does not really fit our remit, which is to explore contemporary British issues.

Stuart Cosgrove

Given these big centrepieces, it might be worth me also mentioning something that might be useful to some people in the audience. We are going to be announcing soon a slate of 90-minutes arts

films in prime time as well, which will be not only a first for contemporary British television, but something that goes against the absolute grain of what the commercial marketplace is telling other broadcasters. These will be commissioned by Jan Younghusband and her Arts team. They are things that are quite grand in scale and also will need co-production or whatever. She will be making that announcement soon, so do not rush to her until she gives more clarity on that. However, what you are beginning to see here, with the doubling of our run of *Dispatches* in prime time, with the increased commitment to origination in drama, with new arts programming in prime time, is a sense that Channel 4 is not frightened of trying out very ambitious pieces in prime time. The Drama team have tried things, both in the recent past and things that are coming up, that simply no other broadcaster could dare to look at, either because it would not commercially work for ITV or the subject matter is too challenging for the BBC to place in its prime time schedules, so more of that.

Participant

Are you developing anything for radio?

Stuart Cosgrove

The answer to that is yes. In this *annus horribilis* we won a radio franchise, which was nice. You might not have noticed that because it was not about *Big Brother*, so the press did not write about it. Basically, it is a suite of channels that are currently audio-streamed on Channel4.com/4radio and quite a lot of the material there is also available to download via iPod and so on. It is a mixture of news, serious drama, comedy and all the rest of it. Without getting into a lot of the detail, it will replicate some of the key portfolio things of the TV station. We will have a channel which will be called 'Pure4', which will be like More4 in the sense that it will be serious current affairs, original drama, original debate and discussion and we will have all the things that you would associate with *Channel 4 News*, etc. Of course, there will also be other areas that will be more like E4 radio that will have the synergies with *Skins* and things like that.

That is a whole new set of ways of thinking about content. Obviously, it will not go on air for some time yet because we have just won the franchise and it is a couple of years before we get to launch, but certainly for radio producers it is a big new area. In fact, I think in terms of the escalator of talent it is certainly the case that in Comedy one of the things that we have always lacked at Channel 4 is an outlet for radio comedy and the BBC has always stolen a march on us there because they can develop comedic talent over three or four years on radio and then bring it to television. That is something we have never had the luxury of, so it is another opportunity.

Participant

Taking on board the comments about the requirement to be relevant to now, do you only commission things set in the present?

Luke Alkin

No. We are close to green-lighting a big historical series set in the English Civil War.

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

There is a reason for that, which is that it explores contemporary themes. It is about the English Civil War, but it is saying this is not the first time that England has been torn apart by religious factions or fighting.

Sophie Gardiner

I would say it is very unlikely for a series to be anything other than contemporary.

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

Another big issue for us obviously is that our budgets are severely stretched by period and also the BBC does costume drama. We would never do anything with carriages per se. Carriages and bonnets are not really Channel 4.

Participant

May I clear something up? Regarding the E4 series, you want something that is not in the same ballpark as *Skins* or that school type of thing, but I presume you are still keeping the same audience target?

Sophie Gardiner

Yes, it is the same demographic and I am sure the main characters will have to be teenagers. It is hard with 'a group of teenagers who are friends' pitches to think how we will sell that differently from *Skins* and it has to stand very separately. However, it is still the same 16-24 year olds; I am sure there will be teen characters. That is why we began to think about maybe a high genre piece, just to see how we can make it very different because *Skins* has such a clear identity on E4 and we need something as powerful as that but totally different.

Stuart Cosgrove

That would be true of all the genres, of comedy, factual or whatever, and the route of entry is through the commissioning editor, who then is able to differentiate between a More4 piece, an E4 piece or a Channel 4 piece and will work it through the system.

Participant

[Inaudible]

Sophie Gardiner

It does not fit, obviously, with what we are looking for at the moment. I suppose you always need to have the caveat of if something just amazing come through that everyone passionately believed in the yes, it possibly could get through, but certainly the main thrust at present is for returning series or series with the potential to return. That would be the main thrust.

Stuart Cosgrove

One other point that we have announced at Edinburgh is that over the next 4-5 years Channel 4 will gradually decrease the amount of money it spends on American-acquired drama or American-acquired comedy. One of the rationales behind that is that in the past we were probably the only channel that had a real eye for American series, going back to *Friends*, *Frasier* and whatever, and increasingly, more and more channels are fighting over the less good American content that is around just now. That is not something that we want to spend more money on than we are currently doing, so gradually, over the next three or four years, we will be decreasing our spend in that area. In the first year, that is £10 million saving, but as the contracts expire it will be considerable more than that. That money is the money that is being spent on more new original drama commissions from the UK, more new documentaries and more new arts programmes. Hence that is another way where this money is being found that we are currently talking about as part of the creative renewal programme. With luck, therefore, in three years time we will start to notice the impact of that in terms of increased commitment to original drama as well.

Participant

Is there a reason why you are not commissioning high volume drama series?

Sophie Gardiner

I think it is to do with risk. They are very expensive, try six parts and if it works we bring it back for another six. In fact, *Shameless* is 16 and that is unusual, but it is the fifth series, so it is not such a risk to go to 16 on that.

Stuart Cosgrove

Also, we looked strategically over the years at the zone where the conventional soaps and continuous series are and it is clearly an area where we noticed with *Brookside* and one of the reasons that we exited from *Brookside* and replaced it with *Hollyoaks* was that that market is phenomenally crowded and competitive by the big broadcasters and our offering is a more factual one. Therefore, drama moves to 10 and I think at that level it suits much more these series that come and earn their space.

The other interesting thing is that because we sell commercials, the third floor earns all the money that we spend on programmes, they have to go out in the marketplace and the advertising market wants two things and they are entirely contradictory. They want predictability and they want newness. Thus, to some extent they want to hear a new season launch with exciting new dramas, because they have adverts that they want to place around those. Therefore, I think that unless something is exponentially brilliant we are always likely to be looking to refresh it. However, things like *Skins* and *Shameless* have been big hits for us, it is hard to turn away from them and as long as they are creatively renewing themselves then they are attractive to return to.

We are now going to close the proceedings. Thank you.

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J +44 (0) 20 7269 0370**