

Channel 4 - Events
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Drama's Commissioning Plans

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Head of Drama, Channel 4

I. Entertainment on Channel 4

We thought that we would just briefly introduce ourselves and then show you a tape, after which we would talk quite briefly again and take your questions. As we do not have a great deal to say, we will start by playing the tape.

[Video presentation]

[End of video presentation]

Liza Marshall

II. What We Want to Commission

1. Non-prescriptive Approach

As I hope you can see from the tape, what we would like to commission are big, bold ambitious ideas that are really original and essentially stand out from the other channels. What we are striving to do, therefore, is something different, we hope, with drama that is risk-taking and derivative and asks challenging questions about contemporary society and shines a light on sections of society that you might not normally see on television. Probably the most important thing to say here – which is why I am not going to talk for very long – is that we are not prescriptive at all. I am never going to say that we are looking for a police drama or a doctor drama; essentially, what we want is great writers, whether they are experienced or brand new, to bring us their absolutely best ideas and passion projects. We will then decide with them what shape it should take.

We are therefore essentially not commissioning to slots, but just trying to make the very best work. It might be a single. You possibly know *The Devil's Whore*, which is four hours, and we have a new project that has just started shooting that we are doing with Revolution, with three two-hour films called *Red Riding*, based on the novels by David Peace, who wrote *The Damned United*, which you might have heard of. It is directed by three different directors and is therefore very ambitious. These are three standalone films that actually work as a three-part serial, set in Yorkshire in the 1970s and 1980s about police corruption. It is a kind of noir-type crime thriller, a

little like James Ellroy in the North. We have attracted a fantastic cast and great directors and it is all really important to us to make work that is really of great quality.

Coming up we also have – and this was not on the tape because we are obviously in pre-production – a film that Sam Morton will direct, which will be her first foray into directing. This is an intensely personal story about a little girl growing up in care and takes things to a completely different scale. *Red Riding* is a massive, big production and Sam's film is very small, yet it is about a very important issue. It will be the centrepiece of the season on Channel 4, which is something that Julian is very keen to do with certain dramas. That is what we did with *Fallout*, as part of Disarming Britain, and that worked really well and brought a lot of attention to the drama.

2. Having a Channel 4 Feel

Inevitably, as everyone knows, we actually do not make very much drama. I think that we manage to punch above our weight and every drama we make has to really stand out and make an impact and a noise in a good way, be it through subject matter or casting. It therefore has to have a distinctive Channel 4 feel.

We are often pitched a lot of dark, gritty, depressing material, although I hope that our films are not dark, depressing and gritty. However, we inevitably tackle quite difficult subjects. Nevertheless, when you are pitching to us, we are looking for a variety of tones. It is very hard to find a comedy project that has resonance and says something about the world, and if we could find that, it would be great. As I said, we want to not just have challenging material, but a range of material. *The Devil's Whore*, a big period drama, is something that we would not normally do, but because it is written by Peter Flannery and because he has been thinking about it for 10 years, ever since *Our Friends in the North*, it was something that could not really turn down. It is quite political and a very different type of period drama – there are definitely no bonnets and carriages.

That is what we are looking for, therefore, in brief terms. It is essentially projects that we feel passionate about and want to see on television. We tend not to develop a lot and have quite a small slate. However, with luck, we put things into development that we really care about and think have a real chance of going all the way and being made.

III. A Small and Straightforward Team

We are a very small team, with just me, Robert – our Head of Development, and Camilla Campbell, who is on holiday, who looks after *Shameless* and *Skins* and also oversees *Hollyoaks*, which is a massive job. She also looks after our children's development – which has been in the press – that we are developing and we hope to make something soon.

That is it, really. I would just like to say that we are very straightforward and not, I hope, like the other channels. We try to respond quickly. You can send us your ideas through eWorks and we will respond within two weeks. Just pitch your best ideas to us. We have to turn a lot of them down because we do not have masses of money and just try to make the best things.

If you would like to ask a question, we will try to be as helpful as possible.

Questions and Answers

Participant

Could you talk more about drama for children?

Liza Marshall

There was a period when we were open to ideas and, officially, we are no longer looking for any more ideas for now. This is really a kind of trial. We have a fund and we hope to make at least one drama from the fund and we have few things in development. I have to be vague here, because I cannot say what they are. We hope to have something on next year. In terms of age group – it is for 11-16 year olds, which is a massive, difficult age group, and we are probably aiming towards the slightly older end of that. We want to appeal to an audience that is not catered for, once they leave Children's BBC (CBBC), as it were. It is therefore pre-*Skins* and they will not all be taking drugs and having sex, but will be going to secondary school, thinking about taking drugs and having sex – but not actually doing it.

Participant

You said something in the press about possibly commissioning for 4IP.

Robert Wulff-Cochrane, Head of Development, Drama

Again, there is not really a clear policy yet in terms of how that will work. We want to expand our drama output online, mainly in conjunction with the children's fund – where we have looked at projects that generally have a cross-platform feel and a strong online presence. We are obviously aware of the fact that the younger audience is coming to programming in a way that is different from older viewers and are using the Internet a lot more to access drama. We are therefore not yet looking for ideas there and are not sure what kinds of funds are available for online drama projects. Again, it is a case of if people bring us very strong ideas which excite us, we would like to start developing them. I think that it is all about people bringing us those ideas.

Liza Marshall

We are already doing a lot with *Skins* and *Hollyoaks* online and it is very easy to work with that within those brands. However, I agree with Robert; if you have a great idea, you never know. There are pots of money hidden away at the channel that we cannot access, but perhaps with the right idea, we could.

Participant

What slots have you actually got available and [what are you looking for]?

Liza Marshall

As I said, we are not commissioning specifically to slots. We have a pot of money and as and when the ideas come to us, we will work out how we will cut the money up. Last year, we did a lot of

singles and this year we have *The Devil's Whore* and *Red Riding*, which are completely different shapes. We are therefore simply material-driven. We did not go out looking for those specific shapes, but really just developed them like that; I realise that that is very vague.

Participant

I suppose that that does mean that you are more open to talking about concepts, be they one-off, three-parters or six-parters.

Liza Marshall

Yes.

Participant

It is more than the case of you saying that it has to be a six or 10-parter, for example.

Liza Marshall

That is absolutely right. What we like to do is meet the writer, hear about the idea, work out if we like it and then discuss things. Most things are clear – you will think that this is a single film, that is four parts and so on. However, we are very open-minded and will do whatever fits the idea best. As I said, it is all about creating an impact on the channel. We will see how *The Devil's Whore* and *Red Riding* play and whether they do better than a single film might have done.

Participant

You said that *Fallout* came as part of a season. Is that something that could come from the production company, where they would come with a drama idea that could fit into a whole slot of seasons, as it were.

Liza Marshall

Do you mean that you would have the idea for the season?

Participant

Yes.

Liza Marshall

Yes, it could happen that way. To be honest, it has not happened like that so far because we just happened to have *Fallout* and then Julian thought that we could make a good season around it. I am quite wary of commissioning something in order to fill a season because I do not think that we work like that. We are more just about the ideas and then it happens the way it happens. However, if you have a great idea, we will listen to it.

Participant

What would normally comprise a season? How many dramas would there be?

Liza Marshall

Normally, it would be just one unfortunately, followed by documentaries. *Fallout* was the one and then there were documentaries around it, along with the commission with Cherie Blair.

Participant

Could you talk a little about how, if at all, you define the difference between E4 drama and Channel 4 drama?

Liza Marshall

I think that with E4 drama, at least, we are aiming at the teenage market exclusively and with Channel 4, we are aiming at a slightly older age group. When you looked at the tape, a lot of seems as if it skews towards older people, but the core audience is 18 to 34.

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

On E4, it is 18 to 25 much more squarely.

Liza Marshall

I think, brutally, that is the difference. E4 dramas therefore need to have teenagers in them and be about teenagers and their concerns. *Skins* has been so successful in developing shows for that channel that it is hard to know what you can do that is different from it. We need really bold ideas that are completely different and do not just look like a not-so-good version of *Skins*.

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

What Angela Jain – the Controller of E4 – is very clear about with E4 is that it is Entertainment 4. It therefore goes without saying that she wants drama on that channel to be fun, and it needs to be funny. That is her policy. There can therefore be nothing dark – no teen murder series would work on E4, for example.

Liza Marshall

There are not a lot of slots on E4. However, again, when you have great ideas, bring them to us.

Participant

In terms of working with writers, what is your definition of a new writer? How new is new?

Liza Marshall

That is quite a hard question.

Participant

[Inaudible] you want to work with them?

Liza Marshall

We obviously have the Coming Up scheme, which Robert runs, although I know that that is through an existing production company. They are very new writers.

Robert Wulff-Cochrane

They tend to be theatre writers. The whole point of Coming Up is that it is for writers who have never had anything produced or a terrestrial transmission. We have picked up a lot of the writers that we have worked with on the scheme and have other ideas in development with them. Again, it is all about the idea. If an incredibly young, but talented writer came to us with a great idea, we have the money to take risks on someone like that. Obviously, the risk is in the development and many times those developments do not work out. However, we embark on development with very new writers all the time.

Liza Marshall

Roy Williams, who is obviously an extremely well established theatre writer, had never written for television before *Fallout*. That was therefore a journey that we went on with him – in terms of writing a screenplay that got produced. I do not know if there is anyone else that we have worked with recently who is new.

[Carleen Paige?]

As regards the split between comedy and comedy drama, Channel 4 drama is normally quite distinct and is hard-hitting, edgy and gritty – those are the words that you tend to use for it. I just wondered how you viewed things that had a lighter sensibility, possibly, and more humour. Should that go via the comedy department or would you be interested in things like that?

Liza Marshall

Obviously, we have *Shameless*, which is funny and is our big funny show, as well as *Skins* on E4. I would say that if it is half an hour, it should go to comedy and if it is longer, we should take a look at it. We are not in the market for out-and-out comedy drama in the way that ITV might be in terms of straightforward relationship comedy drama – we are never going to do that. It would have to be subversive in some way or particularly rude or something like that. It would really have to be a bit edgy because everything that we do has to fit into the Channel 4 brand, which is to take risks, be different, be innovative and all of those things which I am sure you have all heard a million times.

Helen Mattioli

As there are no further questions, I would like to thank Liza and Robert, and thank you for coming in and for all your questions. The one-to-one sessions will follow very shortly. Thank you.