



CHANNEL 4: 40 YEARS OF REVOLUTION

Channel 4's TV Drama Revolution

Panellists: actors Robert Lindsay and Lindsay Duncan, original Drama Commissioners Peter Ansorge and Karin Bamborough, and current Channel 4 Drama Commissioning Editor Gwawr Lloyd.

On 2 November 1982, Channel 4's opening night schedule included two dramas. At 8pm, the channel transmitted the opening episode of its new soap opera, *Brookside*. Then at 9pm, in the first ever Film on Four slot, came *Walter*, a film written by David Cook, starring Ian McKellen, and directed by Stephen Frears.

Film on Four and *Brookside* were to remain the two dominant TV drama commissions of Channel 4's early years. *Brookside* was in fact the only major investment in a TV drama series. Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs and Head of Fiction David Rose (Fiction not Drama, note) favoured the single play over TV series. This was controversial at the time. The BBC had taken the opposite route. It was cutting back on its single play output in favour of a greater investment in drama series and serials. There was huge scepticism within the BBC and ITV about Film on Four's intention to release their films in UK cinemas before showing them on television. Other than *Brookside*, the main TV Drama events on Channel 4 were two annual seasons of Film on Four premieres on television. (There was other drama – singles and series – coming out of C4's innovative Multicultural and Workshop departments.)

It was in fact the success of Film on Four in cinemas that led to a need to commission other strands of TV Drama. Against all expectation, audiences in the UK started to queue up at the cinema for new British movies like *Letter to Brezhnev*, *Mona Lisa* and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), all original and entertaining portraits of the UK in the 1980s with something fresh to say. The case of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Stephen Frears, was particularly significant. It became a global success. Distributors around the world became interested in investing in Film on Four but demanded a much greater window between the films being shown in cinemas and on television. The window moved from two months to two years.

The Channel faced a shortage of drama to schedule over the coming years. A Commissioning Editor for Drama Series was appointed (Peter Ansorge), and the channel began to commission four new major drama series a year, alongside *Brookside* and Film on Four.

A Very British Coup (1988) was the first success. A three-parter, based on the novel by Chris Mullin and adapted for television by Alan Plater. It begins with a newly elected Labour Government in the UK, led by Harry Perkins, determined to lead the country into a positive era of socialist reform. Harry's policies provoke the Tory minority opposition, together with MI5, into plotting a coup. The project began as a screenplay for Film on Four. The producers were unable to raise the finance as potential co-producers, particularly in America, did not believe that such a localised UK political story could succeed in the cinema.

Alan Plater (1935 – 2010) was one of the UK's leading TV writers, and the opportunity to convert *A Very British Coup* into a television series brought out the genius in him. The three episodes observes our politics – both left and right – with authenticity, humour, and an accuracy that audiences in both the UK and the US acknowledged. Rarely has a political leader come as alive on screen as Ray McNally's Harry Perkins – humane, purposeful, and able to outwit each and every opposition MP and hostile journalist who crosses his path. He is the Labour leader we've all dreamed of but never yet elected. *A Very British Coup* was made and transmitted at the height of the Thatcher years and became, on one level, the political fairy tale for which we had all been waiting. On seeing it, the Greek prime minister, Ioannis Grivas, announced: 'I am Harry Perkins.' Director Mick Jackson brought a pace and dynamism to the direction that was also new to a UK political thriller.

Traffik (1989) A six-part drugs thriller, written by Simon Moore, that crosses three continents and countries. *Traffik* begins in the poppy fields of Pakistan where the crop is grown and converted into heroin, it then moves to Hamburg, Germany where the drug is distributed, and finally to London where the drug is bought and consumed on the streets. Bill Paterson memorably plays a Tory Home Secretary whose daughter becomes a heroin addict. Lindsay Duncan is the Hamburg drug distributor, an icy and enticing performance from an actor then new to television. Jamal Shah plays the Pakistan poppy grower, Fazal, who travels from Pakistan to London seeking revenge.

Traffik was the first TV drama series to incorporate three separate storylines and sets of characters into a single narrative which only comes together in the final episode. The series was an inspiration for Stephen Soderbergh's Hollywood Oscar-winning movie *Traffic*. David Simon is on record saying that the UK's multi-story *Traffik* was a big influence on *The Wire*.

GBH (1991) Robert Lindsay is outstanding as Michael Murray, the Labour leader of a far-left near-criminal local council in the North of England. Michael Palin plays a headmaster of a school for special needs in the same town. Lindsay and Palin clash when Michael Murray organises a general strike in the town, and Palin refuses to close his school. As the author of *Boys from the Blackstuff*, Alan Bleasdale was at first criticised for his negative approach to 'old' Labour. But *GBH* grows into something broader and more original than a straight political drama. It's a study of the breakdown of our politics. As the episodes develop Murray becomes increasingly unhinged and out-of-control. We start to engage with Murray and the deep flaws in his character, rather like Walter White in *Breaking Bad*. While the Michael Palin character, Jim Nelson, a character on the decent side of Labour policy, turns into a much tougher character than the one we met in episode one of the series.

Typically, from Bleasdale there is also a large amount of humour. The 'wooing' scenes between Robert Lindsay and Lindsay Duncan, a secret service agent up from London dedicated to Murray's downfall, are unforgettable. *GBH* remains one of Channel 4's most successful and memorable original drama series. Viewers on All4 are still writing enthusiastic thank-you letters to Bleasdale today.

Tales of the City (1993) Channel 4 fully funded the first season of Armistead Maupin's stories of sexual encounters in the San Francisco of the mid-1970s. It was the first time ever that a UK broadcaster commissioned an American drama series.

The US producer Alan Pool, who went on after *Tales* to produce *Six Feet Under* for HBO says this: 'The role Channel 4 played in creating *Tales* cannot be overstated. Initially the plan was to do a 13-hour adaptation that would be funded half by Channel 4 and half by an American broadcaster. The American side failed to materialise – no network or cable channel would touch the material. Instead of backing out, Channel 4 committed to fully funding a six-hour adaptation, even with no guaranteed American sale.'

'Channel 4's one stipulation was that we hire a British director. We watched the work of many contenders but the one that stood out was C4's *Traffik* directed by Alastair Reid. After meeting Alastair and learning of his passion for Armistead's book, his fascination with magical realism, and his all-embracing love of the characters, we knew we had our director.'

Tales of the City debuted on PBS on 10 January 1994: 'It garnered,' writes Pool, 'The highest rating for a drama programme in PBS's history. *Tales of the City* forever changed the landscape of television, paving the way for the domestic lesbians of *Ellen*, the straight girl/gay/boy antics of *Will & Grace*, the unapologetic promiscuity of *Queer as Folk*.'

Russell T Davies, author of *Queer as Folk* and *It's a Sin*, has described *Tales of the City* as: 'The first and best series to show gay life on the screen.'

Peter Anson, August 2022

Robert Lindsay

The BAFTA, Tony and two-time Olivier Award-winning actor has enjoyed a hugely successful career starring in popular BBC sitcom *My Family* and *Citizen Smith* as well as numerous Shakespearean adaptations and stage shows including; *Me and My Girl*, *Onassis*, *Prism*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Entertainer*, *Anything Goes*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and starring opposite Laurence Olivier in *King Lear*. His screen credits include *Maleficent*, *Galavant*, *McDonald & Dodds*, *Dodger*, *GBH*, *Hornblower*, *Jericho*, *Friends and Crocodiles*, *Gideon's Daughters*, *Nightingales* and *Jake's Progress*, both for Channel 4.

Lindsay Duncan

Lindsay Duncan is a Tony and Olivier award winning actress, renowned for her extensive career both on stage and screen. Film credits include the Oscar and Golden Globe award-winning film *Birdman* alongside Michael Keaton, Marc Webb's *Gifted*, Roger Michell's *Le Weekend*, Richard Curtis' *About Time* alongside Bill Nighy, and Tim Burton's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. On television Lindsay has recently appeared as Ysabeau De Clermont in Sky One's *A Discovery of Witches*. Other appearances include *His Dark Materials*, as Clementine Churchill in *Churchill's Secret*, Frau Bellinghaussen in Stephen Poliakoff's *Closer to the Enemy*, Grace in HBO's *The Leftovers* and Lady Smallwood in BBC's *Sherlock*. Lindsay was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2009 for her services to Drama.

Peter Anson began his career in TV Drama at BBC Birmingham working as script editor and producer under David Rose. His productions there included *Gangsters*, David Hare's *Licking Hitler* and *Empire Road*. His later award-winning drama series commissions at Channel 4 include *A Very British Coup*, *Traffik*, *GBH*, *The Politician's Wife* and *Tales of the City*. He currently teaches the popular 'Writing The TV Pilot' course at the National Film & TV School which is sponsored by Sara Geater at All3 Media.

Karin Bamborough joined Channel 4 in 1981 as Commissioning Assistant for Fiction and Arts, became Commissioning Editor for Film on 4 and single drama, and finally co-deputy head of drama with Peter Ansorge. In 1991 she left Channel 4 to join the Norwegian State Broadcaster NRK as Controller of Drama. On returning to the UK she was an independent producer before becoming Head of Producing at the National Film and TV school, where she is still a senior tutor.

Gwawr Lloyd is Drama Commissioning Editor at Channel 4. Gwawr works across a wide range of Channel 4 dramas and co-productions – most recently *Chivalry* and *Light in the Hall*. Gwawr and the team at C4 Drama's aim is to commission and broadcast the most talked-about and original drama in the UK. Previously Drama Commissioner at S4C where she commissioned *Y Gwyll/Hinterland*, *Hidden* and *Un Bore Mercher/Keeping Faith*. Prior to this she was a producer at the BBC. Gwawr is based in the C4 Bristol Hub and lives in Cardiff.

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Music & Youth: The Tube + Discussion & Q&A

Fri 2 Sep 18:20

Comedy: Discussion & Q&A

+ The Comic Strip Presents: Five Go Mad in Dorset

Tue 6 Sep 18:15

Channel 4's TV Drama Revolution: Discussion + Q&A

Sun 11 Sep 14:15

A Very British Coup + intro by author Chris Mullin

Sun 11 Sep 16:30

Diversity: Handsworth Songs + Q&A with

John Akomfrah + Panel Discussion & Q&A

Mon 12 Sep 18:15

Out and Proud: Veronica 4 Rose

+ Out on Tuesday + intro by original

Channel 4 Commissioner Caroline Spry

Thu 15 Sep 18:15

Access / Direct Speech: The Work They Say Is Mine

+ Women of the Rhondda + Face of Our Fear

Tue 20 Sep 18:15

Channel 4: The Television Revolution

Fri 23 Sep 18:20

Controversy: Jesus the Evidence + V + Mother Ireland

Sat 24 Sep 18:00

Who Needs Channel 4?

Wed 28 Sep 18:20

Channel 4 Then and Now conference

Fri 23 Sep 10:00–17:00 and Sat 24 Sep 10:00–17:00

Regional screenings and events will be taking place at these venues across the UK (please go to bfi.org.uk/whatson for links): Arnolfini, Bristol; Filmhouse Edinburgh; Queen's Film Theatre, Belfast; Y Drwm, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

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