



## Funny Business

Cheryl Taylor describes her role in encouraging comedy production in areas where there was little activity and in countering perceptions that comedy from the nations and regions was an amateurish



Cheryl Taylor  
Comedy Commissioner Out  
of London, BBC

cousin of glamorous London product. BBC comedy provides a positive role model for devolving production to the nations and regions although Wales and Northern Ireland are still under-represented.

I look after many of the comedy shows that come from beyond the M25. The main areas I am concerned with are the North and the three nations – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. But my brief includes comedy proposals from *any* out-of-London indie, be they in Bristol, Brighton or Birmingham. My job is to work specifically with out-of-London independent production companies but I also liaise with regional in-house production teams as I believe it's useful for them and the indies to be aware of any potential duplication of development projects.

When I started the job in 2005 there seemed to be a huge mountain to climb – both in encouraging comedy production in areas where there was little or no activity and also in countering the perception that comedy from the nations and regions was the poor relation – a naive and amateurish cousin of the more sophisticated and glamorous London product. Less than a year after I was appointed I took over the job of the Controller of Comedy, who was on maternity leave for nine months. This presented an opportunity for me to build my own strong and, hopefully, enduring relationships with the Channel Controllers and other key personnel in London.

Opposite: Gavin and Stacey

I believe these relationships have been enormously helpful in countering the perception that commissioners resident in the nations and regions don't necessarily have influence when it's crunch time and the real decisions are made.

In the past the advantage sometimes lay with the bigger London-based companies, some of whom were criticised for winning regional commissions by opening regional offices merely for the duration of a production. Having a commissioner based

outside London has helped to dispel these fears. Part of my job is to work closely with untested independents and to steer them through the gritty process of development. Rather than leaving them to struggle with a set of guidelines I can talk to them face to face on several occasions and customise the process to find the precise level of help they need. It

may make the development process slightly longer and trickier at first, but it reaps dividends in the long run and is vital in terms of genuinely being able to establish new producers.

The simple truth is that it is always the script that comes first, and that is the thing that excites me. If a small company is



Funland

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funding script development itself, it is vital the money is well directed. An example of two Indies new to comedy production (but both recipients of BBC indie development funding) are Channel K, headed by Matt Tiller, and Freeform, whose Head of Comedy is Joanna Blake. Both sent in early drafts of projects that we thought had great potential and I have been able to meet them regularly rather than what might have been just twice a year if I was based in London. Both companies have had series commissioned in 2008 (*Gemma Factor* and *Admin*) and the general feeling is that these commissions might not have happened without the dedicated support of a regional commissioner.

However, it is not just the new or the risk takers who work in the regions. Increased development has (thankfully!) heralded more regional shows on screen from more established sources. For example, the 2008 Christmas line-up saw *Wallace and Gromit* from Bristol, *The Royle Family* from Manchester, the return of *Rab C Nesbitt* on BBC Two from Glasgow and of course the triumph of *Gavin and Stacey* on BBC One from Baby Cow Manchester. Perhaps most striking of all we have just had not one but two mainstream shows from Scotland



Rab C Nesbitt

playing on BBC One (*Life of Riley* and *The Old Guys*) – and this is a first for Scotland as their stalwart, *Still Game*, has always played on BBC Two. This wonderful slate of shows felt like a real achievement not least because all of them are perceived as genuinely funny first and regional second.

This situation also creates a virtuous circle. When I started, it was sometimes difficult to mount studio-based sitcoms outside

London or Manchester as the required technical infrastructure didn't exist. Now, because of the increased activity and interest, there is a burgeoning of facilities (e.g. The Pie Factory in the North West and the new Pacific Quay studios in Glasgow) as well as personnel and possibilities. It is now quite possible to find the facilities, the crews and the talent

across the nations and regions to make not just development, but production a reality.

We have also been promoting the value of radio and online developments – especially for the smaller companies; these are pertinent ways of honing production skills and road-testing ideas and both are useful routes for smaller (and bigger) companies to try. Another way we try to cater for newcomers is to marry a new company with an established executive producer who has worked on a similar show. Manchester, for example, has a growing network of experienced producers who have been attracted back to the area because of the increasing volume of work here.

Another great strength of Manchester is that there is already a huge pool of talented comedy writers. Among its many fine qualities *Coronation Street* has a lot of wit and humour, and

is a fantastic training ground for sitcom and comedy drama writers. Carmel Morgan, the creator of *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, also writes for *Corrie* and *Shameless* as do *Drop Dead Gorgeous* contributing writers Stephen Russell and Jan McVerry.

I've spoken a great deal about encouraging new companies – and this is because we recognise that to increase national and regional production we must see a rise in the number of indies operating out of London. Of course the more established practitioners also play a vital role. We receive a stream of interesting and creative ideas from veteran outfits such as Red (Manchester) The Comedy Unit (Glasgow) and Rollem (Leeds) We are also delighted that Craig Cash, one of the driving forces behind *The Royle Family* has just started *Jellylegs* in Manchester, and Ruth Jones of *Gavin and Stacey* has set up her own Welsh production company, Tidy, with producer David Peet.

In-house, there is plenty going on too. Comedy North is the BBC's Manchester-based comedy production unit. Our spheres are quite separate – they offer ideas directly to London, rather than going through me – but we are always aware of what the other is doing. In only a few years they have established themselves with hits like *Funland* and *Ideal* with Johnny Vegas, and the sketch show *Sallywagga*. They work in close partnership with the BBC writersroom to encourage new talent and a few years ago a Writer-in-Residence bursary scheme was set up with BBC Northern Exposure, offering £6,000 a year to fund a writer to spend two days a week with Comedy North developing ideas across the networks. One of the writers to come out of that scheme was Tony Burgess, a stand-up comic who

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Jellylegs Productions



Ideal

Overleaf: Drop Dead Gorgeous



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wrote for *Ideal*, also appeared in it and then went on to pen his own series *The Visit*. In only a few years the department has established a real northern presence in the BBC’s comedy output and has become a beacon of encouragement for other regional departments.



Worst Week of My Life

Why does that matter? Comedy is a key genre in representing and promoting cultural diversity, and some of the most memorable sitcoms through the history of television have reflected that, from Carla Lane’s *Bread* to Graham Linehan’s *Father Ted*. More recently *Gavin and Stacey* has done wonders by promoting

Wales and in particular Barry Island where tourism has increased hugely as a result. We hear that there is even a guided tour of the various Gavin and Stacey locations! The BBC, with its network of national and regional production centres, and its duty to spread the benefits of the licence fee, has the unique potential to reflect humour by tapping into tomorrow’s generation of comedy performers, writers and producers across the UK.

We recognise that tickling the nation’s funny bone isn’t

something that can only be done from an office in London. Nor can comedy be straitjacketed by regional quotas or diversity targets. As a Comedy Commissioner my prime concern is to find shows that are funny. If they can be funny with an authentically northern, or Scottish, or Welsh accent, then so much the better. My job is simply to make it as easy as possible for comedic geniuses from every corner of the UK to beat a path to the BBC’s door. Their side of the bargain is to make us laugh – wherever we live. ■

Cheryl Taylor began her network career at the BBC working on Comic Relief. She was later appointed Commissioning Editor for Comedy at Channel Four, where she was responsible for such series as *Black Books* with Dylan Moran, *Tamsin Greig* and *Bill Bailey*, and *Spaced* with Simon Pegg, Nick Frost and Jessica Stevenson. She then became Head of Comedy at Hat Trick Production and was Executive Producer on *Worst Week of My Life* and *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, before rejoining the BBC in 2005 with the specific brief of developing comedy proposals from outside London.

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