



## Made in the Midlands

Jonnie Turpie says that British broadcasting needs to reflect the country's diversity, exemplified in the Birmingham region, and invites broadcasters and independents to work together to establish hubs of

digital media to reflect the regions through digital content, production and distribution.



Jonnie Turpie  
Digital Media Director,  
Maverick Television

One of the driving forces when I started Maverick Television in 1993 was a desire for the emerging independent sector to have a strong presence outside London. Maverick is based in Birmingham, a diverse region that is home to people from all over the world who have settled in the Midlands. I firmly believe that British broadcasting needs to reflect this diversity; its programming must discover and enjoy showcasing all the fascinating views, attitudes and cultures to be found the length and breadth of the UK.

Maverick has established deep roots in the city and the surrounding region. Through a combination of this integration and staff living locally, we have authentic understanding of the character and diversity of the area. This is of great benefit when making programmes that uniquely reflect our part of the country.

*Bollywood Star* is an example of how this knowledge and feel for regional culture can be reflected in programming. Made by Maverick for Channel 4, the series gave viewers the chance to audition for a role in a Bollywood movie that would be shot in Mumbai. The show had its genesis in Birmingham precisely because people working in the region understood the local passion for Bollywood. As a result, a nationwide audience experienced and enjoyed the music and flamboyance of these films through this innovative reality series.

Opposite: Birmingham Alpha Tower geese

With auditions held in the Midlands, contestants were encouraged to travel from all over Britain to take part. However, it did seem appropriate for local resident Rupak

Mann to triumph and fulfil her lifelong dream. It was a truly regional production with national and international appeal. Two Royal Television Society Awards further confirmed the show's success.

However, Maverick does not just make programmes with a regional slant; our aim is simply to produce

high-quality content from a regional base. We have established a reputation for lively, high-rating popular factual entertainment shows such as *Ten Years Younger* and *Embarrassing Bodies* that have been made for network transmission, but the possibilities are limitless. We have proved that Birmingham is a hotbed of talent that can travel: last year, our series *How To Look Good Naked* was co-produced by Maverick in America.

Meanwhile, our new series for BBC Three, *Bizarre ER*, is set in an A&E department in Norwich. Although content or concepts for any of our programmes may originate in Birmingham, here is an example of a show that can migrate anywhere in



Setting up *Embarrassing Bodies* in Birmingham

the UK, placing a spotlight on local people and displaying a glimpse of their lives to a national audience.

In common with any regional independent we must both retain and attract the best talent and be able to persuade it to remain in the region by continuing to win commissions for innovative programming. We appeal to established talent precisely because of the quality and success of our shows. The best executives, producers and directors want to work on these programmes so are happy to stay in or move to Birmingham to work with us.

In addition, it's been an integral element of my 25 years in the industry to encourage growth within the company and have young people joining us from a range of backgrounds and disciplines. We have formed relationships with the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT), Skillset (the national media training agency) and the Universities of Warwick, Birmingham and Birmingham City to offer work placements providing young people with experiences of the industry. We have also co-operated with other independents and Channel 4 to provide opportunities for a 12-month grounding in the business that has enabled a wide diversity of people to gain a foothold in television production. We also enjoy the fact that First Light Movies, the UK Film Council's young people's digital filmmaking scheme is, based in Birmingham and provides resources for the new generation of talent.

Relationships with a range of organisations within the region are an important part of growth and development, not only for Maverick, but also for the local creative industry. More investment brings better opportunities, more talent, more success and therefore more commissions. Skillset and Advantage West Midlands, the Regional Development Agency, have, for example, co-operated efficiently to support the traditional television and film industry as well as the emerging digital media sector.

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Once the infrastructure is in place, it becomes easier to attract additional investment. For example, the Midlands have become a popular destination for filmmakers – not only because of the vast choice of locations, from mountains to skyscrapers, but also because the facilities and finances are in place to support a film production.

One such film was *Confetti*, written and directed by Debbie Isitt, which received crucial funding from the BBC, the Screen Agency and the Regional Development Agency. This effective collaboration helped to produce a fine comedy that was ultimately bought by Fox and distributed worldwide. Its success resulted in Debbie receiving a three-picture deal in the United States.

Other films such as *Faintheart*, for which people auditioned through YouTube to appear in, *The Road To Guantanamo* and *Atonement*, have all been filmed in the area in recent years. These are big movie projects that bring added investment and kudos to the region, and their success will undoubtedly encourage more activity in the area.

The BBC is now establishing a centre of excellence in Birmingham, which guarantees resources and a renewed demand for production. With ITV retreating from the regions, for clear commercial reasons, it is vital for a major broadcaster to invest in and continue to support these areas. Channel 4 has shown continued investment, through network commissions and major co-financing with the Regional Development Agency, into digital media through 4iP.

Along with other independents in the area, Maverick is part of a creative hub in the Midlands. Growth in the industry means that everyone can benefit from an increased pool of talent. For example, Alexandra Fraser was a product of the BBC’s graduate trainee scheme. While working for the BBC she commissioned some short films by Maverick and soon became intrigued by our output. She joined the company

Opposite: Gail Porter Laid Bare, ONE Life series



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initially as an executive producer on *Trade Secrets* but enjoyed the life of an indie so much that she is now our wonderful Creative Director. Much of the nature of television work is freelance, so we are part of the local creative economy that supports people who can and do work for different companies during their careers.

The BBC’s presence and investment in the area has real power to change the landscape of the industry. *Coast* is an example of a much-loved series developed and executive produced from Birmingham and shot around the coast of the UK. The BBC’s commitment to the region allowed the birth and subsequent growth of a great concept and format.

The licence fee can now make a decisive contribution to the future of the media industry in the UK. It is clear to me that producing high-quality content requires not just excellent producers and directors, but talented staff at all levels and effective, modern equipment and facilities houses to back them up. All of which stimulates the UK and regional creative economy.

This is all happening at a crucial time as the UK moves towards the digital switchover in 2012. Quite simply, the future of broadcasting is as much about online media, interactivity and mobile technologies as television. Broadcasters and independents could work together to establish hubs of digital media with the aim of reflecting the regions through digital content, production and distribution. Birmingham has embraced digital media, not just in the city itself but across the West Midlands. We’re seeing many projects happening across the city region that are pilots and test beds for new sorts of commercial and public service content, which local and global markets are demanding. I am looking forward to the plurality of commissioning of innovative, original digital content that this revolution offers as we embrace a diverse and digital Britain.

Jonnie Turpie has produced and directed drama and documentary over the last 25 years. Following from his career as an artist in his own right his touchstone has been collaborative film and television. Jonnie founded Maverick in 1993. It has since grown to be one of the most successful UK regional production companies, winning the Royal Television Society’s Best Regional Independent award for four consecutive years. The company has forged a reputation for producing challenging and innovative documentaries, features and factual series for all the major UK broadcasters. In recent years, Maverick’s output has included the award-winning primetime series *Ten Years Younger*, *How To Look Good Naked* and *Embarrassing Bodies*.

Jonnie is now Digital Media Director of Maverick Television and has continued to pioneer in digital media. The Digital Media department currently produces Teachers’ TV, 4Homes, 4Car and Film4 alongside a raft of other creative and online initiatives including the 2009 BAFTA for *Embarrassing Illnesses* interactive. Throughout his career he has contributed to the development and delivery of policy across the screen industries and has always had a special focus on young people’s filmmaking and education. Jonnie is vice chair of First Light Movies.

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