



Shooting Grouse and Shooting Up

Anne Mensah describes the three-step plan put in place by BBC Drama Scotland to create a sustainable creative infrastructure:



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first, to make sure there was enough work; second, to enable contemporary Scottish life to be reflected on screen; and finally and most importantly, to build a stable and sustainable economy for television drama in Scotland.

I can't believe that I've been living and working in Scotland for three years. It has been the most amazing journey and has gone like the clappers.

Surely this is the best BBC Drama department to run? It's small but perfectly formed. Scotland has a superb track record in drama and film, with past TV series like *Tutti Frutti*, *Taking Over The Asylum*, *Real Men*, *Hamish Macbeth* and of course the outstandingly successful *Monarch Of The Glen* drawing in big audiences across the UK. The issue for us is not a lack of talent.

So the big question was why, when I arrived as Head of Drama, were there no actual projects in production with the honourable exception of *River City*? Having done so well in the recent past, we needed not only to change that position but to identify why it was that drama production in Scotland was subject to erratic highs and lows. We decided that we needed to look beyond our own development slate and try to put a plan together to create a sustainable creative infrastructure catering for all scripted material in Scotland.

Opposite: Wallander

It was a simple three-step plan. Step One had to be about employment: simply making sure there was enough work coming through the door to stop talent having to leave. Step Two would be about representation: enabling contemporary Scottish life to be reflected on screen. Scottish audiences deserve to see themselves on TV. Step Three would see

the fulfilment of what we were really about: building a stable and sustainable economy for television drama in Scotland.

Since it can take years to develop a new drama series, the best prospect in the first year was to make projects set anywhere, without worrying about whether they were especially Scottish

in character. Single dramas like *God on Trial* or *Fiona's Story* and series such as *PAs* helped with this. We also made shows like *Waterloo Road* and *Wallander* as I don't think Hadrian's Wall should be a barrier for anyone. I love that BBC Scotland Drama makes shows that travel around the world. We won the Television with a Conscience Award (from the US Academy of Television Arts and Sciences – the Emmy people) for *God on Trial*, which was shot in our new studios in Dumbarton, just outside Glasgow. That's absolutely as it should be.



God on Trial

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However, although much of what we did was shot in Scotland using Scottish crews, it could easily have been commissioned and made elsewhere. So in this, our second year of the strategy, the aim is to bring to the screen more dramas that are set in Scotland and reflect contemporary Scottish life. There's a brilliant (possibly apocryphal) phrase that came up at the Scottish Broadcasting Commission inquiry: that Scottish dramas were either about 'shooting up' or 'shooting grouse'. *Taggart* and *Monarch* are brilliant, well-made and popular shows but they can't be the only representation of Scottish culture on television. My long-term ambition is to develop a body of contemporary drama that commissioners will know can *only* be made in Scotland, using local writers, directors and actors and showing the lives of Scottish people as they are lived in the twenty-first century. The utterly beautiful comedy drama *New Town*, a murder mystery set in Edinburgh made by Annie Griffin's Pirate Productions, who have been based in Scotland for over ten years, is an example of the contemporary take on drama that Scottish productions can achieve.

Indeed, that is our aim for the third year of the plan: to increase the amount of material made by companies whose roots are inside Scotland. That is not to say, however, that there will be *no* work available for non-Scottish-based companies. I'm back to Hadrian's Wall as a swinging gate, where talented people can cross back and forward regardless of their nationality. But we do have to acknowledge that people living in Scotland perhaps know Scotland the best.

In order to develop a strong Scottish drama base, smaller local companies need to be given a chance to get their foot in the door. So we developed 'The Scottish Singles', which provides an arena in which to make films that unashamedly play to a local audience. A partnership with Scottish Screen initially helped to fund the series, and provided a third of the money – the rest was put in by BBC Scotland. Hurrah for BBC Scotland. The only rule for the strand is that each production

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must be shot in Scotland, and be about contemporary Scottish life. Although primarily it is designed for a Scottish audience, the hope is that at least some of the films will also be given a network screening. Single drama is a superb playground for all levels of talent, and although the budgets are not large, the standards are high. The first film, *Zig Zag Love*, showcased the amazing talents of Gillies MacKinnon and Mary Morris, whilst the second, *One Night in Emergency*, is Gregory Burke’s first film for television and will star Kevin McKidd.

To accompany this, BBC Scotland is working with a variety of agencies in Scotland to create a unified training scheme to train a new generation of network drama producers. But none of this can come to fruition without the writers who will create the material that will fill our screens. This summer, at the Edinburgh Film Festival, we will launch a ‘Celebration of Scottish Writing’, a programme of workshops, road shows and competitions throughout Scotland. Again, the initiative

is being supported by a number of partnerships: The Comedy Unit, the BBC’s writersroom, and Glasgow Caledonian University, which this year is launching an MA in television screen writing (developed with Shed Productions). There may or may not be new writing for screen that is commissioned directly as a result of our ‘year’, but most importantly we want to have fun and to raise consciousness of the brilliance and diversity of Scottish writing.

With not a grouse in sight. ■

As well as heading up the Independent Drama team, Anne is Head of BBC Drama Scotland. She has extensive experience working with both independent and in-house productions and prior to joining the BBC in 2001 she worked for Carlton Television and in the independent production sector. Anne’s recent network drama projects include *Hope Springs*, an eight-part prime-time series for BBC One; *PAs*, a six-part series for BBC Three; *Wallander*, a three-part drama for BBC One starring Kenneth Branagh; the return of *Waterloo Road* for a fifth series and one-off dramas *Fiona’s Story*, *God On Trial* and *New Town*. Beyond network commissions, Anne’s drama department is also responsible for Scotland-only drama projects including Scotland’s hugely popular soap, *River City*, as well as ‘The Scottish Singles’, a creative partnership with Scottish Screen.

River City

