



The Key

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The Key

A major new drama from BBC Scotland



The Key is a sweeping and ambitious three-part drama which re-unites the Bafta Award-winning team of writer Donna Franceschild and director David Blair, and stars Dawn Steele, Ronni Ancona, Frances Grey, Ann Louise Ross and June Watson. The drama recounts the story of the last century through the eyes of one family, encompassing three generations of a passionate Clydeside clan, headed by Mary Corrigan (Dawn Steele and later June Watson).

Barbara McKissack, BBC Scotland's Head of Drama and executive producer on *The Key* says: "Donna Franceschild has written an immensely rich and ambitious drama which brings to life both the compelling struggle of the Scottish labour movement and an epic family tale. At its heart *The Key* is a very human story. It's about three generations of a family struggling to make the best of their lives in very difficult circumstances. That's something we can all relate to."

A Little Bird production in association with Making Waves, *The Key* also features Stephen McCole, Kevin McKidd, John Sessions, Ewan Stewart and Ken Stott. The drama draws upon many of the key moments of British political history during the 20th century, ranging from Bloody Friday in 1919, when thousands of workers gathered in Glasgow to demand a 40-hour week and were set upon by mounted police, to the brutal chaos of the miners' strike demonstration at Orgreave in 1984.

McKissack continues: "Mary's life mirrors the century. Without making *The Key* sound like an exclusively women's piece, which it definitely isn't, there are very strong female characters at the core of the drama. Viewed through the prism of Mary and her family, *The Key* reflects on the human impact of cataclysmic social and political changes."

Franceschild, who made her name with such acclaimed work as *Donovan Quick*, *Eureka Street*,

A Mug's Game and *Takin' Over The Asylum*, outlines her inspiration for the series: "I was fascinated by the idea that on every life that has ever been lived is written the history of their time and their generation's struggle. We tend to forget that so much we now take for granted – votes for women, the abolition of child labour, health and safety legislation at work – was hard fought for and won."

Producer Sue Austen, who also worked with both Blair and Franceschild on the film *Donovan Quick*, says: "This is a wonderfully crafted story which, through the lives of an ordinary family, charts the rise of the trade union movement in the early part of the 20th century, the destruction of the unions in the Eighties and the birth of New Labour in the Nineties."

"*The Key* happens to be set on Clydeside," Austen adds, "but it could just as easily have been set in Liverpool, Manchester or any industrial city. The same stories happened to millions of people. In the end, it's a wonderfully uplifting human saga with resonance for every family."

"Although I lead a very different life from my mother and grandmother, there are lots of strands connecting us," continues Franceschild. "I'm angry that current events are always interpreted as if we have no history. The past explains how we got here. We have to understand it in order to know where we're going."

Director David Blair says: "It's very heartening that we can take on these huge, ambitious projects. Donna has effortlessly created a genuinely complex structure in which she manages to interweave five different periods. She shows the parallels and echoes that resonate throughout the century."

"She has a great understanding of humanity. I've worked with Donna since 1992, so our relationship is almost telepathic now. It's been such a fruitful partnership because she's always writing about subjects I'm really interested in. You know there'll always be soul in the piece."

"I gave every period its own texture. So I filmed 1915 to 1919 in black and white, 1945 in muted colours and the Seventies with a warmer, fuller look. Every scene takes the viewer into a specific period."

"It is passionate and thought-provoking, and exemplifies single-voice drama at its very best," concludes McKissack. "From *Takin' Over The Asylum*, through *A Mug's Game* and *Donovan Quick*, the BBC has always been a proud champion of Donna's unique vision."

The Key, a BBC Scotland production for BBC Two, from the Bafta Award-winning team of writer Donna Franceschild and David Blair, presents a century's history from the perspective of those who have experienced it at the sharp end.

The Key

Main cast

Mary Dawn Steele
Older Mary June Watson
Duncan Kevin McKidd
Danny Stephen McCole
Maggie Ronni Ancona
Helen Ann Louise Ross
Jessie Frances Grey
Joe Ewan Stewart
Billy Ken Stott
Spencer John Sessions
Katherine Katy Murphy

Production credits

Writer Donna Franceschild
Producer Sue Austen
Director David Blair
Costume Designer James Keast
Make-Up Designer Jane Walker
Film Editor Frances Parker
Director of Photography Nigel Willoughby
Production Designer Andy Harris
Music Composed by Anne Dudley
Executive Producers Jonathan Cavendish (Little Bird)
..... Donna Franceschild (Making Waves)
..... Pippa Harris (BBC)
..... Barbara McKissack (BBC Scotland)

*The Key is a Little Bird production in association with
Making Waves Film & Television Limited for BBC Scotland*

Episode One

Mary is drawn passionately into the politics of her time through her love for Duncan – a doomed love that becomes somehow invested in the mysterious key Mary wears around her neck.

Six decades later, Mary's granddaughter, Jessie, is a bullied and asthmatic teenager. Written off by her teachers and living in the shadow of her high-achieving sister, Maggie, she retreats into the stories she writes.

By 1997 Jessie is a single mother working at a call centre for Sogard Healthcare, a company at the centre of a bitter dispute in the community. Under a Private Finance Initiative agreement with the local council, Sogard took control of Riverview Old People's Home – where Mary now lives. Jessie's sister Maggie was deputy leader of the council that pushed the initiative through. Her mother, Helen, was regional officer of the union that opposed it.

"We fought the good fight," Helen concedes. "We lost." But Danny, a care worker at Riverview, and the object of Jessie's childhood affections, has refused to leave it at that.

Episode Two

Mary struggles through the Depression and War years. Her favourite granddaughter, Jessie, comes of age in 1979, the year Margaret Thatcher comes to power.

It is 1933 when Mary loses a strike vote opposing wage cuts at Leckie's Mill and is sacked. Supporting her mother and sister in a one-room tenement flat, she realises that her only option is to marry and she takes Billy, a violent middle-aged widower, for better or for worse. For the next 12 years, it is mainly worse.

In 1979, Jessie's wedding to Danny, her childhood sweetheart, promises to be a much happier event. However, a drunken writer, a bleeding critic, a taxi and a stolen kiss conspire to produce a disastrous chain of events that eventually leaves Danny stranded at the altar, Jessie on a train to London in her wedding dress, and her unfinished novel in the rubbish bin.

In 1997 – 18 years after Jessie left him at the altar – Danny confronts Jessie's mother, Helen, now a union representative, with evidence that Sogard Healthcare have broken vital agreements with the union over the new old people's home. He persuades her it's time for the union to fight back.

A popular campaign is launched in the Scottish press opposing Sogard's plans and the PFI agreement, which Maggie pushed through. The battle lines in the family have been drawn.

Episode Three

Having been mercifully delivered from her loveless and violent marriage at the end of the Second World War, Mary watches as Helen, her daughter, and Joe Rossi, a communist shop steward from the shipyards, settle into a life of post-war domestic contentment, producing two grandchildren: Maggie and Jessie. But their lives are irrevocably altered in 1968 when Joe is seriously injured in a shipyard accident and confined to a wheelchair.

To make ends meet, the family move into Mary's house and Mary begins the task of raising the next generation. By 1984, Maggie has become an employment lawyer and, though she has married "outside" as far as her father is concerned (her husband's family are Tories), she makes a good life for herself.

Jessie has not been so lucky. Five years after she left Danny at the altar, Jessie returns home, bruised and pregnant, and introduces the family to her four-year-old son, Andy. She is received with tears of joy.

By 1997, Jessie's life is still a disaster and, having finally secured an interview, she hopes only for promotion from the call centre floor at Sogard Healthcare to a secretarial position at head office.

In this final episode the stories of all three generations converge. As the crisis over the old people's home comes tragically to a head, it tests to the limit the loyalties of everyone in the family, and forces the timid Jessie to take the most courageous decision of her life – in which she finally discovers the meaning of her grandmother's key.

Dawn Steele plays Mary Corrigan



Dawn Steele is one of Britain's leading young actresses, with starring roles in *Monarch Of The Glen*, in which she married the laird, and *Tinsel Town*, as sassy clubber Theresa, to her credit. In *The Key*, Dawn is the young Mary Corrigan, the factory worker who becomes politicised during the First World War through contact with her fiancé, Duncan (Kevin McKidd).

Steele was attracted to playing Mary (who is played as an older woman by June Watson) as she is such a complete contrast to her previous roles. "It's fantastic that in this I'm not wearing little skirts and make-up, although by the end of the shoot I was desperate to get the make-up on again!" she laughs.

The sheer power of the role was also a lure for Steele. "Mary's a very strong character," the actress declares. "She's very political. She kick-starts the family's interest in politics, it's amazing how it all stems from her, right down to her granddaughter,

Maggie, standing for election to Parliament.

"It's great to see that her passion is carried on through the generations. Even in her eighties, she is out there demonstrating on behalf of the miners at Orgreave. She is not scared, she gets right in amongst them during the riots."

Mary shows great fortitude during the course of the drama, a fact that Steele deeply admires. According to the actress, "Terrible things happen to Mary. She only smiles twice in the whole piece. She has to deal with big riots and being beaten up by a tyrannical husband [played by Ken Stott]. And throughout all these difficulties, she has no support. She just has to get her head down and get on with it."

The actress found echoes of that steeliness within her own family. "My nana is like that. She's still going strong in her old age – she's always off to dancing classes and things like that. There's a real strength to these women."

Just occasionally, however, Steele found it hard to live up to Mary's example. "I cry quite easily, so it was difficult in many of these scenes not to let myself go," she admits. "But director David Blair kept saying to me, 'Don't cry, be strong.' Mary has got to have that inner strength or she wouldn't survive till the age of 99. However, when I first read it, I cried three times!"

Ronni Ancona plays Maggie, Mary Corrigan's high-achieving granddaughter



Whether she's Posh Spice, Carol Smillie or Judy Finnegan, comedy actress Ronni Ancona has made a *Big Impression* on audiences with her award-winning impersonations. In *The Key*, she makes her BBC drama debut as Maggie, the ambitious older granddaughter of Mary Corrigan. As Maggie ascends higher and higher up the political ladder, she finds herself increasingly having to compromise the beliefs her family inculcated in her.

It is evident from Ronni's performance in *The Key* that she is equally at home in straight drama as she is in comedy. "Right from the start, director David Blair said I was not gimmicky casting," she says. "He doesn't give a damn about what I've done in the past, he's only interested in whether I'm right for this part or not. Nor was it a conscious decision on my part to make a change. I didn't say, 'Oh, I want to do drama now.' I was just really eager to do such an excellent script."

All the same, Ancona is expecting some to carp about her choosing to appear in a straight drama. "I'm apprehensive that certain people will say, 'She's

a comedy girl – who does she think she is?"

Obviously, this is not the sort of project I'm usually associated with, but I don't approach comedy or drama any differently. As soon as you think, 'Oh I'm doing comedy now,' you're on to a loser. Whatever you're doing, you have to make it live and breathe."

The actress felt an instant bond with her character. "Maggie is full of contradictions, but that makes her very human. She's a bright girl who is very principled. She's caring, confident, feisty and intelligent and has a very dry wit. But there's no denying that she's also got a big ego."

The actress thinks that Maggie undertakes a very convincing psychological journey during the course of the drama. "She grew up with a strongly socialist background, but as she develops you can see her being pulled away from those roots. As she moves away, inevitable tensions arise between her and her family.

"It all leads to a big showdown with her mother. Maggie says that 'without power, you can't change anything'. But we can see that's a slippery slope. Where does the compromise end? Maggie feels it will stop once she gets elected as an MP, but she's merely being naïve."

The character's idealism is gradually eroded as the drama unfolds. "She has a great conscience and has worked tirelessly as an employment lawyer," continues Ancona. "Her decline is an insidious process – it's all too easy to be dragged into this world of spin. She knows in her heart of hearts that it's not right, but the New Labour spin-doctors convince her it's OK. It's very tempting for Maggie, but it slowly dawns on her that she is betraying everything her family stands for.

"Whether you're playing Posh Spice or Maggie," she continues, "the key thing is to create something believable. You have to find the reality and truly inhabit the character. If viewers can't identify with what you're doing, it's never going to work."

The actress will next be seen as a South London "masseur" in the forthcoming movie, *The Calcium Kid*.

Frances Grey plays Jessie, Mary Corrigan's favourite granddaughter



spacemen, but how often does that actually happen? We all feel unfulfilled in some way. Jessie's been victimised and lacks confidence. She would have liked to become a writer, but life has got in the way.

"Her spirit has to be rediscovered and she needs the love of a good man to achieve that. The relationship between Jessie and Danny reflects her grandmother's romance with Duncan. There is an intriguing 'will they, won't they?' quality about it. I'm drawn to romances that aren't obvious. I find them fascinating."

Frances Grey, who has had high-profile parts in such varied work as *Vanity Fair*, *Messiah* and *Murder In Mind*, felt a real affinity with Jessie. "I like her gentleness and her spirit," Grey confirms.

"When she's a teenager, she's put upon and bullied, but she still has this fighting attitude. She desperately wants to write and is bursting with feistiness and joy. However, all that has left her by the time she's 36. She's working in a call centre and manifests all the sadness of a life that hasn't fulfilled its potential."

The actress, who hails from Edinburgh, adored dressing up for the period sequences in *The Key*. "The costumes are hilarious," she laughs. "In the scenes set in 1984, I look like Shakin' Stevens's sister – it's hard to feel cool in a Flock Of Seagulls hairdo! And in the 1979 sequences, I look like the front cover of a *Jackie* annual!"

Grey believes that audiences can relate to Jessie's life. "Small children always say they want to be

Ann Louise Ross plays Helen, Mary Corrigan's daughter



Ann Louise Ross, who has appeared in dramas such as *Split Second* (directed by David Blair), *Trainspotting*, *Looking After Jo Jo*, *Hamish Macbeth*, *Life Support* and *The Acid House*, feels a real empathy with her character Helen, Mary's daughter.

"What a tower of strength she is!" Ross exclaims. "I really admire her passion. Helen has been brought up in a very political household and a lot of her mother's strong beliefs have rubbed off on her. As a result of her husband Joe's industrial accident, she has had to take work as a cleaner. She eventually becomes a full-time regional organiser for a public services union and she also has lots of relatives living in the house – all in all, she's absolutely exhausted."

The actress, who has recently been on a Dundee Rep tour of Tehran with a production of *The Winter's Tale*, hopes that the sheer political passion of *The Key* might help re-energise disillusioned voters.

"Voting figures are very depressing now. We've become disenchanted with politics because we've had it too easy and don't think politicians make any difference. There is complacency about the electorate, an apathy, a feeling of 'I'm all right Jack'. People think, 'why should I bother about people who aren't having such a good time?'"

"We have become more insular, and the idea of the extended family has gone. The old days of hanging out of the window and having a chat about life with the neighbour have passed because now we've got *Trisha* and *Kilroy* instead. So it would be lovely if this drama helped people become re-engaged with politics. I think that would be quite a contribution."

One of the key elements of the story in this very politicised family is a breakdown between Helen and her eldest child, Maggie. Despite the personal battles she has fought, Helen still has time to wage her political wars.

Ross continues: "A Private Finance Initiative threatens the closure of local old people's homes, where her mother Mary lives, and Helen is concerned that the cutbacks mean fewer staff and poor food. Maggie, who is on the verge of being elected as one of Blair's Babes in 1997, is not prepared to compromise her chances of becoming an MP, not prepared to go through the same struggles as her mother. That's a real blow to Helen. She is genuinely disappointed by Maggie's New Labour politics. Maggie hopes to change things from the inside, but her mother knows it will never happen."

June Watson plays the older Mary Corrigan



June Watson portrays Mary when she is older (she is played as a younger woman by Dawn Steele). The actress, who recently had a leading role in the Martin Clunes vehicle *William And Mary* (“I played a housekeeper who does a lot of Hoovering and looking disapproving”), reckons that ultimately *The Key* is a very positive, life-enhancing drama.

June relished tackling Mary Corrigan. “She’s a really strong, feisty woman with a fantastic set of principles. She cares deeply about both life and the fate of the workers. Her sheer strength attracted me.

“When Mary is young, her mother says to her ‘oh well, this is our lot, this is what we were born with.’ When her beloved is killed in the First World War, her determination to struggle on behalf of her fellow workers is redoubled. Her strength is also very much in evidence when she is forced into a violent, loveless marriage and she copes with everything with a tremendous sense of fortitude.”

Later in life, Mary is equally redoubtable. Watson, who has starred in dozens of TV dramas over the years, including *A Mug’s Game*, *In A Land Of Plenty*, *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, *Angels*, *Z Cars* and *Prime Suspect*, comments that: “When Mary is 86, she still feels so strongly that she goes to Orgreave to support the striking miners. She’s still got such passion for life. And she clings on to her humanity even as she is dying. All in all, she has a huge influence on the family.”

Watson enjoyed witnessing the magic of the make-up department as she had to age from 59 to 98. “The make-up is fantastic,” the actress observes. “They don’t use prosthetic masks to age me – they do it all with latex wrinkles or ‘green marble’, which is a sort of plastic make-up. When I have to go down to the age of 59, they give me a ‘face-lift’ with bits of invisible tape. It’s all very subtle and a real work of art.”

And extremely convincing. “When I was playing Mary at 86,” Watson recalls, “I was crossing the road with a walking-stick and looking very dodderly. Later the same day, still in costume, I was dancing around like a spring chicken. You could see the extras thinking, ‘She’s not a real old lady!’”

Donna Franceschild – Writer

Donna Franceschild's television and film credits range from *Takin' Over The Asylum* and *A Mug's Game* to *Donovan Quick* and *Eureka Street*. The trademark of this American-born writer is her enthusiastic championing of the underdog.

Donna's spirited desire to fight for the rights of those less fortunate clearly runs in her family. "When my mum was still a young woman, she found herself having to bring up four kids with no husband," the writer says. "But she never stopped battling on behalf of others."

Her inspiration for *The Key* is clearly seen in the story of the struggle for workers' rights over the last century, through the vehicle of one fascinating family. It all springs from the central character of Mary Corrigan, an extraordinarily strong woman, whose commitment is handed down through the generations.

"In the Fifties, mum had to go out to work and she discovered that the starting wage for men was the top wage for women doing the same job. She never lost the ethos that it's just not right for people to be treated in that way. You can judge any society by the way it treats its most vulnerable.

"I chose to write about people from the deprived end of the spectrum because their history is in danger of dying out. There are no big political leaders in *The Key*. This is a story of people like us who happen to get caught up in the wider power struggle."

Franceschild has created a carefully crafted structure, which interweaves stories from five different time periods. She observes: "By writing the characters' stories, I'm inevitably recounting the history of their time. I don't have to hit all the political bases because they have to spring naturally from the characters. In the end, I'm not interested in telling people what to think; I'm interested in making them think.

"By intercutting the past experiences of the grandmother with the present experiences of her

daughter and her grandchildren, it shows that you can always find parallels between the ages."

Franceschild fervently hopes that her drama will prompt viewers to reassess their own sense of commitment. "When there's a feeling that things have to change, where does it come from? Not from politicians. It comes from people thinking that things are bad and should not be this way."

She concludes with her philosophy as a writer and the importance of passion in her work. "A writing tutor once told me 'write what you're angry about'. When I stop being angry, I'll stop writing. Every single thing I've written has been guided by the belief that we can choose to be better than we are. Maybe I'm hopelessly optimistic, but I'm pushing 50 now and it's too late to change!"