



# Drama out of a crisis

As alarm bells continue to sound in the world of children's TV, *Matthew Bell* reports on reasons to be cheerful.

Main: *Roman Mysteries*.  
L-r: pupils of *Summerhill*; Nubia and Flavia of *Roman Mysteries*; *The Sarah Jane Adventures*; below right: *Orsum Island*.

OF THE UK'S TERRESTRIAL BROADCASTERS, ONLY THE BBC AND, TO a small but admirable extent, Five are continuing to invest in homegrown production for children's television.

A year ago, as Ofcom mooted the possibility of "public intervention", we first reported on the acknowledged crisis in kids' TV.

Twelve months on, the barbarians – in the form of imported cartoons and merchandise-led programming – are still at the gates. There is, apparently, nothing to save our children from cultural atrophy.

Except... domestically-produced kids' drama is currently enjoying a purple patch. BAFTA-winning children's drama *That Summer Day*, which dramatised the London 7/7 bombings, and *Summerhill*, about the libertarian school's battles with Ofsted, tackled serious issues that kids' dramas usually avoid.

*Roman Mysteries* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures* offer kids rattling good yarns. Children's BBC, which is behind all these programmes, deserves a pat on the back.

CBBC has been making fewer, but higher-quality dramas. Its mantra is "Do less, repeat it more", which, of course, can be taken to ridiculous extremes. The first series of *Tracy Beaker* has been shown 80-plus times on the CBBC channel. Nevertheless, the policy makes sense for kids.

"It has paid off for us," agrees CBBC controller Anne Gilchrist. "It's the same as adult television: you value something that has had a lot of love and work, it shows on the screen and it lasts longer.

"Kids are exposed to Hollywood films and drama in pre-peak on the main terrestrial channels that are very high quality. They won't sit and watch a load of old rubbish."

For independent producers, however, there is less work. "The competition is much, much higher but it does mean only the best get made," says Julian Scott, head of children's programming at Coolabi Productions and chair of BAFTA's Children's committee. "There are fewer opportunities than there were five years ago so you've got two alternatives. You can sit there and think 'woe is me' or you can take a more pragmatic approach."

Scott, who was executive producer of long-running Geordie drama *Byker Grove*, advises producers to pitch programmes with an "international flavour". "Anglo-centric" shows such as *Byker Grove* are now less attractive to broadcasters, although, he adds, "the opportunities for gritty, powerful dramas may be fewer but they still exist."

Martin Haines, commercial director of Little Entertainment, took the international route with *Roman Mysteries*, which recently finished its second run on CBBC. The children's producer has also sold the series to broadcasters in Germany, France, Italy and Spain.

The adaptation of Caroline Lawrence's books about young detectives at the time of the Roman empire was a risky project, not least because the series' high production values pushed up costs to around £1 million an hour. This is an astonishing figure for a kids' drama, a traditionally cheap and cheerful TV genre characterised by the wobbliness of its sets and its actors' accents.

CBBC provided just over half of the budget with the balance raised from private investors. "It's a very exciting place to be but it's not without risk. We are reliant on recouping an awful lot of the cost from international sales," says Haines, who is the series' executive producer. "You've got to have one eye on the international market, otherwise you're slightly crazy."

The subject of Lawrence's books helps: with the exception of the Far East where Samurai hold sway, there is a worldwide fascination with the Romans. It is the kind of non-parochial series that Scott believes more producers could be pitching.

The series offers thrills and spills but, glory be, it also retains the historical accuracy and high-mindedness of the books. Children's drama is a serious subject. "In my stories, my protagonists are trying to learn how to live and love in the adult world," says Lawrence. "I hope the TV adaptation will reach children that might not ordinarily pick up my books — or any other — and get them to start reading."

*Orsum Island*, a new comedy action adventure series using motion capture and computer-generated animation, could not be

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more different in style to *Roman Mysteries*. Yet, its makers – David Lane, David Mitton (who died in May this year) and Michelle Fabian-Jones from Pineapple Squared Entertainment – are steeped in kids’ programme-making. Lane and Mitton both worked for Gerry Anderson on *Thunderbirds*, while Fabian-Jones counts the *Muppets* and the new *Captain Scarlet* among her credits.

Fabian-Jones says Pineapple’s three co-directors had identified a lack of “good quality narrative-driven programming” for six to 12-year old boys. Just two of the 26x22-minute episodes are in the can but a website is already up and running.

“Boys don’t read or [if they do, they] read in sound bites. Their language is not lyrical and they have their own code words. Therefore, the interactive side and access 24/7 at their own pace is absolutely paramount,” she says.

*Orsum Island*, which is being made at Shepperton Studios and has so far been sold to TV2 in Norway and RTÉ in Ireland, may use the latest technology, but it is also rooted in tradition. “Effects are not used for the sake of blowing things up, but to enhance the message and storytelling,” says Fabian-Jones.

The storylines are the most important part of the series, argues Chris Blackburn, the managing director of VGI Entertainment, which is distributing *Orsum Island*. “The animation can be absolutely fantastic but, if the story’s crap, the [whole thing] is crap and you never get it off the ground,” he says. Blackburn hopes the series will air in autumn 2009.

Good kids drama is getting made but, aside from small amounts of comedy on Nickelodeon and Disney, the BBC is the only broadcaster commissioning it. ITV, despite the recent critical and ratings success of shows such as *My Parents Are Aliens*, has bailed out of the genre.

Does Gilchrist find the situation depressing? “I like to think the more success we have with our titles, the more encouraged other people might be to come back to this genre.

“If *The Sarah Jane Adventures* is doing such brilliant business for kids, surely it must be tempting to other broadcasters to at least dip their toes in the water?” 🐉

PINEAPPLE SQUARED



## 24/SEVEN



MOMENTUM PICTURES

**Another day, another genre. After low-budget film thrillers and high-concept TV drama, the very versatile Bharat Nalluri is now going through his ‘romantic comedy’ phase. Quentin Falk reports.**

FIRST THERE WAS THE RECENT CINEMA RELEASE OF THE FROTHY *Miss Pettigrew Lives For A Day*, a period piece set in London on the cusp of World War Two, co-starring Frances McDormand, Amy Adams and Ciaran Hinds.

Then Bharat Nalluri, 43, was off to Hollywood to direct a new ABC pilot, *Cupid* – reworking the 90s US TV series of the same name – about a chap who believes he has a magical romantic touch, but whose psychiatrist thinks he’s mad.

The jury is still out on whether this particular *Cupid* will go episodic. However, if Nalluri’s past record is anything to go by, it clearly has a shot. After all, he directed the opening episodes of three huge UK TV hits – *Spooks*, *Hustle* (for which he also dreamed up the original idea) and *Life On Mars*, which earned him a BAFTA nomination.

All three were for Kudos with whom he also collaborated on the ambitious award-winning mini-series *Tsunami – The Aftermath*. After that, Nalluri recalls, “everyone was sending me *Tsunami*-like projects. Kudos said, ‘wouldn’t I like to do a period romantic comedy?’ They knew they’d get me. It was good timing.”

*Miss Pettigrew*, from a pre-war novel by Winifred Watson, had enjoyed a long, colourful if ultimately abortive film history before Nalluri got to grips with it. First there were plans to make it as a musical in the Thirties with Billie Burke, then it had another brief flurry in the Fifties.

When Nalluri, born in India but raised in Newcastle, came on board at script stage, McDormand was also attached. He’d never heard of Watson but soon discovered spookily that she had actually lived next door to him in the North-East.

When he went to talk to McDormand about the eponymous role of a dowdy spinster who suddenly gets caught up in the glamorous world of a theatrical ingénue, “I quickly realised she was actually interviewing me and we ended up mostly taking about *Evil Dead 3*. I eventually asked her why I got the job and she said that like Joel [Coen, her husband], I was a geek.”

As if directing McDormand – “actor royalty” – wasn’t enough, Nalluri says he also got a particular kick out of shooting the interiors at Ealing Studios – “how exciting for me to make an Ealing comedy!”

Next up for Nalluri is likely to be *The Tourist*, a big-budget trans-European film thriller, scripted by Julian Fellowes and rumoured to be starring Tom Cruise. He remains tight-lipped about that, but clearly confident that a new genre beckons. 🐉