

Guru Live Television Keynote Interview: Kenton Allen

1 May 2016 at Princess Anne Theatre, BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly, London

Krish Majumdar: Good morning. My name's Krish Majumdar, I'm the Chairman of the BAFTA Television Committee. Thank you and welcome to BAFTA Guru LIVE, our three-day event featuring masterclasses, panels and keynotes, which bring to life BAFTA Guru. This event is to give career starters and emerging talent - that's you - access to insights from our BAFTA winners and nominees, to give you the tools to help forge a career in the creative industries and focus... and the focus of today is building a career in television. BAFTA Guru is our online site, it's a treasure trove of content, original content, of BAFTA winners and nominees, and if you've not been on the website please, please, please go on - there's so much content. I think it's such a great time to be starting out in the industry.

I know lots of people say, "God, it's really tough now, it's really difficult to get in," but things like BAFTA Guru give you access to things that I could only dream of when I was starting out. And also nowadays, it's so much easier. You've got the technology, you can make a film on your phone, you can edit it on your phone or on a laptop - so I think these are really exciting times.

This is Guru LIVE's inaugural year, and your feedback is really, really important to us, so after the event we're going to circulate an evaluation form. Please complete this and you'll have a chance to win a full gift nominee's bag from our film awards. So please sign up to the BAFTA Guru newsletter, and that will drop into your inbox regularly, and you'll hear about all the brilliant things we do at BAFTA. And BAFTA's not just about awards - we do over 250 events like this a year, and Guru captures that content online. We either have video, interviews, podcasts, and all the events of Guru LIVE this weekend are going to be podcasted, so please, if you feel inspired, tweet about it @BAFTAGuru, or using #GuruLIVE.

Just a bit of housekeeping, please, as we're podcasting this, when you ask a question later please wait for the microphone. And another thing is, everything is in the public domain, so yes, don't swear. Well you can, we'll edit

it out. There's going to be lunch which you can pay for in the bar, but downstairs Nespressos are free. They're one of our sponsors this year so that's good. And as a ticket holder for the keynote, you're entitled to a free ticket to **Telly's Room 101**, which is going to be in here between five and six o'clock tonight. And then you can join us for a free networking drink, which is sponsored by Mad Dog casting, at the end of the day in the David Lean room. So for Room 101, just by registration, you can fill in a piece of paper and you can tell us your kind of pet hates, and we'll have top TV execs arguing about those pet hates later, so please write your gripes and put them in a box by the registration area downstairs.

And lastly, thanks to Mad Dog Casting, who's the party sponsor, Channel 4, who's the session sponsor for **Directing Your First Hour of Television**, and our official breakfast hosts Nespresso, and hotel partner Ham Yard Hotel.

And now, the main event - our keynote. We're exceptionally lucky to have BAFTA-winning comedy producer and CEO of Big Talk Pictures, Kenton Allen. He's the man behind *Rev.*, *The Royle Family* and *Him & Her*, which have all won BAFTAs, and he's going to be in conversation with the writer and broadcaster Andrew Collins, so please welcome to the stage Kenton and Andrew. Thank you.

[Applause]

Kenton Allen: Here?

Andrew Collins: Yes, I think so. We can just swap round half way through.

KA: Morning.

AC: Good morning. What an unusual thing to be saying at a BAFTA event, good morning. All of you are going to make it in television because you're here on Sunday, Bank Holiday Sunday at 10am looking bright and breezy. Kenton and I fantasised that you've all come from a club.

KA: Fantasy, or maybe reality.

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AC: Please don't dissuade us of that. I first worked with Kenton in, I think it was 1994, on a programme which you may or may not remember... I was going to say, it was twenty-odd years ago.

KA: Me remember? No, I remember it.

AC: Yeah, I remember it. *Naked City*, which was the TV debut of a young journalist called Caitlin Moran - whatever happened to her? And Kenton was the producer of that show, and I was a journalist trying to transform myself into a standup comedian, which didn't really pan out.

KA: That went well.

AC: Yeah. But for a few weeks we were in a studio in Battersea making this programme which was aimed at young people, I think it's fair to say, that's not a generalisation, for Channel 4, that went out late enough at night to prove that. And so he was probably the first TV producer I met, and I'm sure like a lot of people outside of TV, or even those who are just getting a foothold in it, don't even really know what a producer does. It's the classic, it's almost like a truism. We understand what a director does, we understand what a lighting or camera man does, we understand what an actor does and a writer, but a producer is one of those things.

Now Kenton is a CEO, and that's usually a quite a remote job, some reclusive figure with all the power that you never see if you work in a company. But first of all Kenton, you are a CEO of Big Talk Productions, and have been since 2008, which is quite a long stint in the ever-moving carousel of jobs. And we'll talk about what your actual day pans out like, but we're going to go right back to the beginning, because that is the best way I think of explaining television. Building careers is to probably find yourself in the same way that I do, looking back and going, "Wow, I've got a career, I didn't really plan that, I've got one," and that's often the way in the media I think. But, before that, we're going to start off with a showreel, just to show you Big Talk's successes.

So within this showreel, this will give you

an idea of Big Talk Productions, which is where Kenton finds himself now, and then after that we'll do some listening to Kenton and find out...

KA: This year's slate.

AC: This year's slate. So let's first see the showreel.

[Showreel plays]

[Applause]

So that's where Big Talk is right now. Let's go back, Kenton, to the beginning. Because you said to me the other day, actually, on the phone when we were talking about this session, that the thing you most wanted to be when you were young was Tony Visconti.

KA: I did.

AC: A famous music producer.

KA: I wanted to be a record producer.

AC: So that didn't happen.

KA: No, clearly. No, so I was 18 and I didn't go to university. I decided that, well I didn't decide, they decided that that wasn't an option. But, I had a saxophone teacher who said if you want to be a record producer you can do one of three things. You can go to London and go around all of the recording studios that used to exist, knock on the door and say, "Can I have a job please?" Which I did, and they said, "No, bugger off." Or, you can try and get into Surrey University to do a thing called a Tonmeister course, which you have to be incredibly clever to get on, which I wasn't, and didn't. And the third thing was apply to the BBC, because they will train you, which they still will to a certain extent. So I applied to the BBC, I lived in, I grew up in Birmingham, BBC in the Midlands, I applied, and at 18 they foolishly took me on and paid me £4,774 a year to be a trainee studio manager.

AC: Which must have been, at the time, like living the dream, surely?

KA: It was living the dream, Andrew. It

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was, Monday was doing sound effects on *The Archers*, so Eddie Grundy would come in and I'd go, I'd chink some glasses, and go, "Two pints of Shires," and I'd clink the glasses. Or wrap yourself in quarter-inch tape to play Aunt Laura's dead body, which was my coup de grace on *The Archers*. On Tuesday you'd do a Radio 1 session, on Wednesday you'd be the boom op on *Howard's Way*, on Thursday you'd be putting radio mics on people and helping at one and Friday you'd be doing a documentary. This is quarter-inch tape editing for young people, where you'd be in a room with a producer who would go, "What happens if we put that bit there and that bit there and that bit there?"

So you had that for a bit, and that producer, who was also the Head of Network Radio, said, "Oh you're quite good at moving things around editorially, you should be a producer," and sent me to Radio Nottingham where I was a rubbish Drive Time presenter for about a week, but also a producer. And through that I met various people that said, "apply for this" and "apply for that", so I went through the BBC, and eventually ended up at Radio 4 where I worked on a show called *Loose Ends*, where I met writers who wrote Ned Sherrin's opening monologue, and I met comics and people who wrote for a living. And then I went... is this the story? Yes. And then I went to Radio 1, because Radio 1 wanted to improve its speech output at that point. I went to Radio 1 and I worked on things like *Steve Wright in the Afternoon*, where I played Llama Man - half man, half radioactive llama. But just sort of got more work with, in a small environment, radio, with writers and people trying to be funny. And I wrote to Jonathan Ross who at the time had just started doing his show on Channel 4, and said, "Ooh, you're good, you should do a radio show." And we did a 13-week live show at Roddy Scott's called *Jonathan Ross Live from Roddy Scott's*. Danny Baker wrote the script, and it just all sort of came from there. And then Jonathan said, "You're not an idiot, clearly." I didn't correct him of that, and he offered me a job in television, so I left radio for television after four years.

AC: So the kind of, the first big turning

point really is from, well from sound to producing after a week of presenting.

KA: I think, yeah, I think it's just getting in. Even though you might want to do one thing, getting in somewhere where you can just soak it all up. So the great thing about being a trainee studio manager was I just got to get in there and see how it all worked, and work out which bits I liked, and thankfully there were people who were smart and encouraging, just looking at what I was good at and encouraged me in the right direction. Getting in is the tricky bit obviously, and that's why you're all here.

AC: And you, the thing is that you were in an area of work that you really wanted to be in, even if you weren't exactly sure where it was going to take you.

KA: Well I still really wanted to be Tony Visconti, so I really, my dream was to work at Radio 1. There could not be a better job in the world for a young man in his early 20s, to be in London with the world's record companies coming to you every day and showing you all their stuff, and you going, "Ooh, I'd like that one, that one and that one," to play, to give to Simon Bates, for God's sake, to put on the radio. And what I didn't know, when I wanted to be Tony Visconti, was that there was this other world, well I did know... we'll come onto that. What I didn't, I hadn't thought about, was actually not being a record producer but being a producer of storytelling and content. Although I had always been a huge fan of comedy, and my dad had *The Goon Show* scripts, books and books and books of *The Goon Show* scripts which I used to read religiously as a child. So somewhere inside me was an understanding or love of scripts and comedy and all of that. But the things only really coalesced and came together through the good grace of the BBC allowing me to arse about and do things.

AC: Well as you say, the BBC still trains.

KA: They do.

AC: It has a remit to do that.

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KA: Absolutely. It should be more training frankly, but it does have a strong training remit. I know that the current Director General, Tony Hall, wants to do more training. So apply to the BBC, if you can get through the doors of the BBC it's a fantastic institution for training and giving you opportunities to try things out and fail and make mistakes and not be shouted at.

AC: Probably less media-style courses at university when you didn't go to university than there are now.

KA: I think there are, I don't think there were any, there was probably Film Studies courses.

AC: Yeah, well I applied, when I started work in a music paper, at the NME, that was my first job, there were two people in the NME who had been on a media course, which must have been relatively new at that time, that was in the 80s.

KA: I'd love to go on a media course.

AC: Now there are media courses everywhere you go...

KA: Anyone on a media course here? Who's actually on it or done one?

AC: Hands up anyone who's on or wants to do a media course.

KA: Like a third of people.

AC: And you know there's loads of opportunities that way, but I guess the big difference is that there are a lot more opportunities for pinpointing the media, whether it's TV or any other part of it, early on and following that through as a potentially realistic career choice, which there wouldn't have been when you didn't go to university, and I went to art school. But then that equally means, loads more opportunities, also you have to fight harder to get through the scrum of other people doing it.

KA: But also there weren't, because it sounds kind of elysian, "just apply to the BBC", when there weren't 600 independent production companies all looking for bright, young, talented people. There was the BBC and ITV and

that was it - independent production companies didn't exist then. So now there's much more opportunity, obviously in all areas, although there's much more competition I would imagine.

AC: And you worked then for Channel X, which was Jonathan Ross' production company.

KA: Yeah, I left Radio 1 for Channel X, which was Jonathan's fledgling production company, which was making his TV shows. And they, Jonathan had discovered Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer in a pub in Deptford, so they were making *Vic Reeves Big Night Out*. So suddenly you're in a world where there are lots of really young, smart, clever people doing things with scripts and talk shows and trying to be funny. And Jonathan introduced me to the world of David Letterman and Ernie Kovacs, who was a brilliant pioneer of the combi talk show. And Danny Baker was running around being bonkers and brilliant, and lots of writers. So just, you were suddenly in this world of people like you that were trying to do things that you could help, I guess, as a producer.

AC: It was like, Jonathan Ross' production company at that time was like a kind of parody of what you might expect it to be like. You'd walk in and you would see Rowland Rivron sitting around, and Danny Baker, and Jonathan Ross would actually be there behind a desk, it's not like he was some kind of remote figurehead there. So do you think that that model is one that's basically become the standard model for, especially comedy production companies, but TV production companies? That sort of, the person who runs it, their personality's kind of stamped on it.

KA: I think in some of them, yes. I mean you know Steve Coogan, Baby Cow. Pretty impressive body of work, and that was being driven by Steve and Henry's passion. They don't all have to be led by talented writer-performers, but there's been a tradition of them. Talkback, which was Griff Rhys Jones and Mel Smith and Peter Fincham, a non-performing kind of producer behind two

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very talented multi-hyphenates, as the Americans would call them. So yes, but not necessarily, no. I mean at Big Talk we have Simon Pegg, Edgar Wright and Nick Frost, all part of the business that were there before me with my partner Nira. The business has grown with them, but they go off and do all sorts of other things that don't necessarily involve us, so yes and no... whatever the question was.

AC: What we get from reading your CV is that you've spent a certain amount of time, well at the BBC, at Granada, in the independent production company sector, which you're now reigning over. And so you, and you've worked in radio, and you've worked in TV, you've worked in comedy, you've moved from comedy into drama and comedy-drama of late with Big Talk, so you have kind of done everything along the way. What do you do as a CEO of Big Talk? I mean, I know your day is filled with lots of different things, it's not sitting behind an office and...

KA: No, I think what you really do is you try and find great people who need help, or that can help you, and then you put them together and try and make sure that it, that they are allowed to do their best work, is sort of what you do. There's some other stuff you do which is the running of the business, but it's really, as the Chief Executive, you are the person who is taking the responsibility for everything that the company does ultimately, with a fantastic team of people around you, and people that whom without you wouldn't be able to do your job. But you're still trying to spot talent or track talent of all shapes and sizes on camera and off camera, and give them an environment where they can do their best work.

AC: And so as a producer, which is what you'd mostly done up to that point, you're an enabler, you make an environment by doing the things that your writer doesn't want to be doing and your cast don't want to be doing and your directors don't want to be doing, you do everything else so that they can get on with their jobs. That's kind of what a producer is, would you agree with that?

KA: It's kind of that, yeah, but it's also, you don't, you have a creative bone in your body as well which you have to, you know you are, you apply when you're, when it's the right time. There's a great old, I don't know if it's the right time to tell this story. There's a great old journalist saying, which is, a journalist who is fed up of getting phoned up by commissioning editors saying, "Don't you think it's terrible about Ken Livingstone," or, "Don't you think it's terrible about what's happening in Russia with Putin," or, "Don't you think we should all be wearing yellow this season." And her response became, "Have you got a pencil?" And the person would say, "Yes, I've got a pencil." And she would say, "I don't think that, but if you do why don't you write it?" And I think that, to me, it sort of sums up what a producer does, which is it's not my idea. It can be to spark an idea, I might go, "Andrew, have you ever thought about doing a show about a BAFTA lecture that goes terribly wrong, and what happens after that." But it's not my job to write it, it's my job to go, who would be good for that spark of an idea, and it's their job to do it, and that's sort of true of producing, is trying to find the best people to do all of those jobs.

AC: Well look, we're going to see a clip now of *The Royle Family*, which is a sort of key show for you, and after we've seen it you can tell me about how meeting Caroline Aherne on *The Shane Richie Experience* led to this. This is a clip from *The Royle Family*.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

Still brilliant. And that's, I mean that is radical television we're watching there, the idea of people watching television on television, it broke all the rules. The thing that you would always say about soap operas, and you can still say, is that on soap operas, on *Eastenders* they don't watch *Eastenders*, which is exactly what they would be doing. So that's, that's genuinely changed perceptions of how a sitcom can be. Also, it's more like theatre in a sense that it's all in one place and it's people reacting in a

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naturalistic way in real time. So talk about your role in getting that together.

KA: So the reason, the reason to show the clip was because I, because often people ask you, how do you make the leap from working in non-scripted television or working in entertainment or just not being in the genre, a bit early for that word isn't it on a Sunday. Being in television, but not being in the bit you want to be in. So I was in, I was working in Manchester for Granada Television, producing what probably will be seen as a classic of its genre in years to come, a game show called *The Shane Richie Experience*, which involved people competing to win their weddings. Anyway, I think it's online, have a look, as I say ahead of its time. Anyway I was doing that up there. The end game was called Stag and Hens, and it involved the bride to be sitting on a massive hen, firing eggs out of its arse, and then the groom to be dresses as a stag with a big net of antlers on his head catching the eggs. Wow. So I was doing that, but I, the point of the story is about just, about people, and meeting people and developing relationships with people and seeing where that leads. So I was in Manchester and Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash, Henry Normal, were making *The Royle Family*, the first series. The show happened without me, nothing to do with its invention or creation, I produced the second and third series, so I can't take any credit for its originality, all I can take credit for is not fucking it up on series two and three. But as a result of just being around in the department, and getting the train back to and from London, Manchester, and bumping into them and getting to know them, I developed a relationship with them as a kind of just, you know a chap around the office, and didn't think anything of it. And then asked me to produce a Mrs. Merton Christmas Special, which I did, and then off the back of that they and Andy Harris who was their sort of executive producer and my boss said, "Would you fancy producing *The Royle Family*?" So the reason for showing it is not because I had anything to do with how brilliant it is, but it's just about just being, talking to people all the time, being enthusiastic, being interested in what they've done. So I'd seen the first

series and I used to go to the Mrs. Merton studios, just as a kid of punter, watched them and was a fan of what they were doing. So it's just an example of just to be open to people and talk to them and show interest in what they're doing. And often people don't tell people that they like the things that they've made. If you engage somebody you admire, a producer, a writer, in something they've made and tell them why you like it, and you are vaguely intelligent about it, you never know where that might lead. So that was the point of the clip, I guess. Also it's really funny.

AC: It is brilliantly funny, yes. And in order for it to be made at all, it was somebody enabling creative people to do what they wanted to do, which was that, which was quite unusual and might have not sounded like a very sexy ratings winner on paper.

KA: No the great story about *The Royle Family* is that the BBC wanted Caroline Aherne to do another series of Mrs. Merton, and she said, "I will do, but you have to let me shoot this show called *The Royle Family*," and gave them the script. And various people said, "This is rubbish, it's just people sitting around watching the television for half an hour. Nothing happens, there's no story, it's all set in one room. No thank you." But because they wanted another series of Mrs. Merton, who was a big hit, Caroline persuaded them to let her shoot a pilot, which is buried I believe in her mother's garden. Because they shot a multi-camera pilot with an audience, four cameras and that sort of material shot in front of an audience, people laughing-ish, which was a bit of a disaster. And then because of Caroline and Craig's and Andy Harris' general brilliance, they managed to persuade the BBC to let them do it again. And they went film, they shot it on 16mm back in the day, which was an extraordinary thing to do, documentary style, and the rest is history. But it is the bloody-mindedness of Caroline saying, "I won't do this show unless you let me do this show." We can't do that because we're not that powerful or clever, but that's how that show came about.

AC: So at the end of the day, obviously

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you need your creative person or persons, writers with the idea.

KA: Meet a genius.

AC: Yes, that's all you have to do is meet a genius. And get behind them. You know this thing you said about tell people why you like something and that you like something, it's unbelievable in television I find, also in journalism as well, how often you have to take a lack of response as a thumbs up. Because some people won't tell you something's good, they'll just not get back in touch with you and you'll have to assume that that means it's not rubbish, or that it doesn't need writing again or doing again. There is a, and I think it's a lot to do with the huge amount of layers of people that there still are at the BBC, particularly the BBC, where just getting in contact with somebody who then tells you something and you...

KA: Well if you see a show that you like, that you like, then write to the producer. If you like *Catastrophe*, write to, oh what's his name, it's too early. Write to the producer, the names are on the end of the show, it's not difficult, write to them and tell them, "I really like that show, this is why, can I come and have a cup of tea?" It's unusual that people will say no to you if you've just been incredibly nice about something that they've worked incredibly hard on, and you've been vaguely intelligent in the... Don't write a book, but write a couple of lines about why you like it and why you're interested in narrative comedy, or why you're interested in documentary, or why you're interested in whatever it is - "Any chance of a cup of tea?"

AC: And also, you don't have to think inside, well this is what a sitcom is like, which is definitely what happened with *The Royle Family*. A sitcom should be like this, the pilot didn't work, we'll do it like this instead, that worked. You don't have to think inside the box, and that is a really dull phrase but I really, you know in television don't be frightened by what something ought to be like, and in fact if it's the exact opposite that's probably just as well. Things go in waves, though. We're going to show a clip of *Funland*, Kenton, which is probably less seen than

The Royle Family, but was in its own way quite adventurous because it involved a writer of drama joining a writer of comedy.

KA: Yeah, exactly. So I, *The Royle Family* was made by Granada Television in Manchester, well it was shot down here in Ealing Studios, and after two series of that I left Granada, I was asked by a very, very brilliant woman called Elizabeth Murdoch, who you might have heard of, who started a production company called Shine, who you might have heard of, and she asked me to go there and be one of the founding partners in it. So I went and did that for two or three years in 2006 I think, no, I can't remember. Turn of the century, God. And having done that for two or three years I got a call from the BBC to say, "Would you be interested in coming to work for the Comedy department?" And although I'd worked in radio, never worked at BBC Comedy in television, which to me was the pinnacle of, and still think is the pinnacle of comedy globally. There is no better place I don't think. To me it was like the finishing school for a comedy producer, and also I'd never worked in a television broadcasting environment, and the BBC is still the best in the world. So I went and did that, and I got there and realised that, having been in Manchester with Caroline Aherne, and this annoying bloke called Peter Kay kept turning up into the cutting room and giving us his opinions, I realised that we're not going to find the next Caroline Aherne or Peter Kay standing in London in the Groucho Club or Soho House or whatever, and that there wasn't, bizarrely, there wasn't a Manchester-based comedy department in the BBC. So the advice I was given by a very smart man was, it's always better to apologise and ask permission, which is always a good catchphrase in the BBC. So I wrote a press release saying that the BBC were opening a BBC Comedy North in Manchester, and sent it out. And nobody shouted at me, and so that's then what we were doing, we had BBC Comedy North in Manchester. We had to go and find some money, but because it had happened and somebody had printed it and the broadcasters I think we were doing it. As a result of that we did quite a

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lot of things, but one of them was I met Jeremy Dyson who was wanting to write longer format, tell stories over a bigger format than a half an hour sitcom. And a brilliant development producer who was working with me called Gabbie Asher who had come from *Eastenders*, who you know Gabbie don't you?

AC: Yes.

KA: Was on *Eastenders* as a brilliant storyliner, but she wanted to work in comedy so she'd come to us. And she said, "Let's put Jeremy Dyson," brilliant co-writer of *The League of Gentlemen*, "with Simon Ashdown," who at the time was the showrunner on *Eastenders*. And BBC Three had just started and was doing interesting and ambitious things. I wanted to do storytelling on a bigger scale because that's what was beginning to happen in the States, and you could see half-hour sitcom writers wanting to write more interesting, complicated narratives, so *Funland* was born, which I doubt anybody's ever seen. Nope. But which uniquely got nominated for a BAFTA Drama Serial, BAFTA, up against things like *Cranford* and *Bleak House*, from our little unofficial renegade Manchester department. So I thought it would be interesting to show that, because it's rather good and it's on YouTube. It's not on BBC Store, annoyingly.

AC: Isn't it?

KA: No. Anyway.

AC: So this is *Funland*.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

You see, I do remember the gorilla on Blackpool Tower. That's a great opener, I can imagine that on the page and you going, "Yeah, this is going to be good." Obviously some excellent acting talent in there as well, and clearly I would say shot on a, not a high budget. Would that be fair to say?

KA: No no, shot yeah, it was incredibly originally shot on a modest budget. But just giving everybody a chance to do

something different. And obviously it's got a serialised narrative so it's a 'who's in the gorilla costume?' And he goes to Blackpool and meets all these, looking for Ambrose Chapel, Sarah Smart's sexually repressed character, and goes on a journey of discovery. And it was great, great fun to make, and great fun to do something more cinematic, which was the, everybody's kind of motivation for being there.

AC: And a comedy-drama is still a tough nut to crack. Critics always say, well it's not funny enough to be a comedy and it's not thematic enough to be a drama, that is you know, it's easy for them to say, they don't make television programmes. And it's, when it does work, it really works. Because you know if you, *Breaking Bad* is effectively a comedy-drama, you know it's dramatic and it's funny at the same time, and to keep that blend going for a long time...

KA: It's difficult isn't it, because it's about audience expectations. So if you tell somebody, this is why comedy is the hardest genre, I don't care what anybody else says, it's the hardest genre to get right, because it's the only art form that says to the audience, you will have a physical reaction to this, it's going to make you laugh. And if you don't make them laugh they go, "Oh that was shit. It's not funny. Why is this, this is not a comedy." And so drama doesn't say, this will make you cry or make you scared or make you worried or make you anxious. It doesn't promise an emotional experience. Comedy promises that kind of primeval emotion which is to laugh. So often comedy-drama, the audience come to it expecting it to be funny, and then when it isn't it's a problem, because the comedy should come out of character, and not out of situations. So often it's a marketing issue I think. *Breaking Bad* was never marketed as a comedy-drama, it was just a drama, and most of the best American shows that are really funny are marketed as dramas, we're not told they're going to be funny and dramatic, it's a peculiarly British problem. Americans do dramedies, because they're American and they're annoying. But it's, so it's more a perception and marketing thing. So *Funland* was

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marketed as a drama series, and the promos were cut around the drama and the storytelling, and the fact that audiences happened to find some of the characterisations and the situations funny was a bonus. How did we get onto that?

AC: Well then the BAFTA nomination is an amazing...

KA: Yeah, yeah, in Drama Serial, so that was, because it was a closed-end series, we didn't do a second because the mystery was resolved, we talked about it a bit but we felt like we'd done it. So to get recognised by BAFTA was an extraordinary tribute to Jeremy and Simon Ashdown and Dearbhla Walsh, she directed the opening episode, who hadn't done that much by then, she'd come out of promos I think, she was mainly a promo director in television, making those on-air promos. So it was a hugely exciting thing to do, and also just giving you a taste of what, you know, not limiting your ambition, and giving you a taste for other things you can do. Is this interesting to any of you at all?

AC: I hope it's interesting.

KA: Okay, just checking.

AC: It is telly, after all. It's telly day.

KA: Do you want your water?

AC: Why, do you want it?

KA: Yeah.

AC: Yeah, go on.

KA: Thanks. A continuity error, look, there we go.

AC: So we're going to have a clip of two shows that were made by Big Talk since you became CEO. When it kind of, it was formed in the mid-nineties and *Spaced* was the calling card.

KA: So it was started in 1995 by Nira Park, who's my other business partner with Matthew Justice who's the Managing Director. Nira was in an attic flat, she'd been at the Comic Strip, she started on her own and she knew Edgar Wright and

worked with Edgar, and Edgar, Simon and Nick. Written by Edgar and Simon, created *Spaced*, which is still one of the seminal comedies of all time. The pilot I still think is probably the best pilot episode of half hour comedy you'll ever see. Watch it, it's utterly brilliant and perfect. And then she made *Black Books* with Dylan and Bill Bailey. But out of the creative partnership that was *Spaced* she made *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*, which did quite well for all concerned. And when I was at Shine with Liz Murdoch, we tried, I tried to buy Big Talk because I thought they were a fabulous company that hadn't really fully blossomed into the huge creative power they could be. But Nira rightly said, "Bugger off, don't want to do that." So cut to 2008 and I'm leaving the BBC having done things like *Funland* and wondering what to do. I phoned Nira up and said, "What about me coming to Big Talk?" So that happened and we got some backing from BBC Worldwide, who were our distribution partners and put some money in to pay me a bit of money and to sort out what was Big Talk then, because Nira was still in a flat. And Matthew Justice who was an independent film producer who Tessa Ross had suggested to Nira would be a good partner, the three of us met and decided to form Big Talk 2.0, which we irritatingly called it. Do people still say 2.0?

AC: I don't know.

KA: I hope not, it's a really stupid thing to do. Anyway, so we relaunched the company with a brief to do film and television, me leading on television, Nira leading on film, and Matthew keeping it all kind of ticking along. And, what are we going to go into here?

AC: Well we're going to have *Him & Her* and *Rev*.

KA: Okay.

AC: Which are two sort of defining programmes I think are fair to say, and would both fit the bill of being comedic and dramatic, however they might be categorised.

KA: Yes. What are we going to show first,

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Him & Her?

AC: *Him & Her* first, and that's a trailer for series four, so...

KA: Okay, so on the day I left the BBC to go to Big Talk 2.0, there was a BBC drinks, writers' drinks thing, talent drinks thing, which I went to because it was free drink, and I was leaving. And I bumped into a chap called Stefan Golaszewski there, who I didn't really know, hadn't heard of, and got talking to him. I think he came up to me and said, "Hello," good tip. He came up and said, "Hello," and I went, "Hello," and we got chatting. And he went, "I'm in this thing called the Cowards." "Oh you're in the Cowards, I love the Cowards," who were a sketch group at the time with Tom Basden and Tim Key. And anyway, he started asking about *The Royle Family*. He said, "I know you produced *The Royle Family*, I'd love to, that's right up my street, I'd love to know more about it." So I said, "Great, well email me and come and have a cup of tea, because I'm starting a new production company and need talented people like you to help me not screw it up." So he emailed me and sent me two scripts. One was called Young, Unemployed and Lazy, and that became *Him & Her*, which you're about to see, and the other one was called The Funeral, and that became *Mum*, which was on the Big Talk showreel which launches in two weeks time. *Him & Her* was the first thing, so Stefan sent it to me, I read it. Actually, Stefan sent it to me, I gave it to somebody who read it and said, "This is rubbish."

AC: Oh dear.

KA: And instead of going, "Oh okay," I sort of thought, actually I don't really believe that opinion, or is that true, and also I've met him so I better read it because he's going to come for a cup of tea. So I read it and went, "This is brilliant actually, it's not rubbish at all." And it turned into this.

AC: Right. So, and this will be followed by *Rev.* which we'll talk about after. So this is *Him & Her* and *Rev.*

[Clips play]

[Applause]

I consider *Rev.* to be one of the great comedies of this century, I think it's perfect. And whether it ever does come back I know the intention was that it sort of built to this incredible climax, I don't know if you followed it right the way through but it was, this Easter sort of vision at the end was incredible. So even if it doesn't ever come back it's a perfect, a perfect thing I think in television.

KA: Never say never, though.

AC: Yeah, yeah obviously. *Cold Feet* should never have come back and it is coming back, so it can be done and it can work.

KA: What do you mean it should never have come back?

AC: Well this is what, my knee-jerk reaction...

KA: That's your opinion, okay yes.

AC: My knee-jerk reaction is always don't go back.

KA: Well you haven't seen it yet, you might be right, that might be where we're headed.

AC: *X-Files*, *Twin Peaks*.

KA: That shouldn't have come back, that was shit.

AC: Yeah, but I am absolutely confident that *Cold Feet* won't be shit because, a) everybody's in it, and you know it's in safe hands.

KA: Also it's not a, it's not a reboot, somebody was asking me this the other day. *Poldark* is obviously a remake of a classic seventies series, *Cold Feet* is just series six, it just happens there was 14 years between series five and series six. But it's the same writer, Mike Bullen, and it's the same five actors apart from Helen Baxendale who's dead. The character, not Helen Baxendale. So it's just series six fourteen years on. Anyway.

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AC: I can't wait. Yeah, you know we've done kind of comedy-drama and how difficult it is, but you know it's about again empowering the writer. The thing that is now happening more and more in America where it's always supposed to be writers rooms and teams of people, but the idea of one writer is now, because they're doing shorter series, especially of dramas really I'm thinking of in America, one writer writing them all is now quite common. But here it's, all comedy has always been that way, you know the same writer wrote every episode of *Last of the Summer Wine* which went on for decades, Roy Clarke.

KA: Well that is, the Rev., so some of it is to do with luck, which is that the first two things that we developed at Big Talk, Stefan was literally a luck meeting and being open to somebody coming to you and saying hello. So say hello, give you life lessons I guess of how it works, there's no magic. And then Rev. was, we'd made a series while I was at the BBC called *Freezing*, which was made for a tiny amount of money and I think it was three episodes for BBC Four, written by James Wood, who I was introduced to by Simon Curtis, who's a colleague of ours. And it was about a couple, played by Hugh Bonneville and Elizabeth McGovern, I wonder what happened to them, and their friend Tom Hollander, who's based on a very famous, his character's based on a very famous agent. That tiny little show, those three half hours, that was made for nothing, when I was at Big Talk I just phoned up Tom and I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I had this idea about faith and religion, and I was walking through Hyde Park and there was a Muslim family having a picnic, and there was, the vicar was walking through Hyde Park to go and do his service, it was a Sunday, and then there was a Jewish family, so just thinking about faith in London," and that led to Rev. really. But that was another relationship based on something tiny, you've just got to stay in touch with people and keep talking to them and keep the relationships going, because it's all, you know there are no secrets, it's all about relationships and people and being open to ideas, and listening to what people want to do and then helping them.

AC: And that also feeds back into you know, as you go in at the bottom, be nice to everybody is something I've done. I don't know whether someone ever told me that, but I just do it anyway because I am really nice, but be nice to everyone because you never know when you're going to meet them again or whether there might be an opportunity opening up. And the fact that you even had a coffee or a chat might just be your way of getting ahead of everyone else.

KA: There is a very funny story about a very powerful, now commissioning editor, who was being reintroduced in a meeting, in a commissioning meeting to the head of a very successful independent production company. And I can't tell you their names, but they were introduced and the head of the independent production company went, "Hi, I don't think we've met before," and the incredibly powerful commissioning editor said, "We have met before actually. Last time I saw you, you threw a croissant at my head and said, 'I said a fucking hot croissant, that's cold'." So that put him in his place.

AC: Well yeah, it's best not to do that, and remember.

KA: Well it's just that thing about being nice you know, on the way up be nice to everybody because on the way back down you're going to want some help.

AC: Also, "nice to meet you," and "nice to see you," very careful distinction. If in doubt say, "nice to see you," even if you've never met them before, just in case you have met them before. Because it's horribly rude...

KA: Yeah. I've sworn twice now, I'm really sorry.

AC: It's okay, it will be edited out. So you get the exclusive, two fucks. No one else gets that.

KA: Three now.

AC: Three. And we're going to, before we hand over to the audience for your questions which will be about five

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minutes, it's important to play a clip of something we can look forward to from Big Talk.

KA: Oh great, yes. So this is another exclusive, this is again just being open to talented people. Daniel Lawrence Taylor, who's a really brilliant up and coming comedy actor, you'll know him when you see him, he's the one with the glasses in the promo, was in a show with us called *Cockroaches*, written by Freddy Syborn, which only made one series sadly, but hey. But out of that came our relationship with Daniel. Daniel had written this script on spec which he gave to Josh Cole, who's a producer that works with us. And we read it and went, "This is quite good," and we developed it over the course of about a year, and then we shot it six weeks ago, and we've just delivered it to ITV2

AC: So that'll be seen on ITV2?

KA: I don't know, it's a pilot, so often we don't, don't often like to wash your dirty linen in public.

AC: May not be shown.

KA: I think it will be shown because, I don't know actually, it might not be, might hold it back and wait until we've made the series and then we'll release all of it. I'm very proud of it, and for lots of reasons that are obvious on screen, it's just a great thing that we're doing.

AC: Well I'm we're about to hand over to the eager audience, and don't forget to wait for the microphone so that everybody can hear. It's kind of come up anyway naturally, organically while we've been talking.

KA: Has it? I'm so sorry.

AC: Is there one piece of advice that you would give to the room?

KA: What?

AC: One piece of advice about surviving let's say, or building a career, which is what this is about, in television. Having done it, and you're still in it, all these years, all the things, that thing about go up and say hello I liked, but is there

something?

KA: Yeah, I don't really, I don't have one piece of advice. I think it's too, I think passion and enthusiasm and honesty and genuinely knowing what it is that you want to do, which is really hard, but being passionate and genuine and honest about it, and engaged with the thing that you want to do is the thing that I think I'd recommend. Saying what you think they want to hear so you get the job never works, but genuinely engaging with something and being smart and open and passionate about it when you're talking to people about it. That was a terrible bit of advice, what did that mean?

AC: No, it was alright. I'd go with that.

KA: I don't know, I think just get your foot through the door, and once it's through the door don't you know let them take it out. So get into somewhere, and then anywhere that's vaguely in the zone, and then work your way from that position. Don't worry too much that you've been offered a job in factual, but you want to work in drama, just go and get in there because you'll meet people and start to understand how the business works.

AC: Yeah, I did a talk with some students, and one of them was too embarrassed to say it during the Q&A, so came up to me afterwards, the best questions always happen that way. And she said, "I'm really terrified that I'm on the wrong course." And I said, "You can't be on the wrong course, because even by being on something that you feel is the wrong course, you'll find something out by doing it, and then you'll go in a different direction." So that's my bit of advice, even though you didn't ask for it.

KA: But thank you.

AC: Yes, you might use that at some point.

KA: What happened to her? She's now a dentist or something?

AC: Who knows, it would be interesting wouldn't it. A serious thing, when I was at the NME as Features Editor, someone

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rang me up and they put the call through to me, and I don't know why they did but they did, and they said, "It's Tanya in Sheffield." And I thought, I don't know anyone called Tanya, I don't even know anyone in Sheffield. And she said, "Hi, I'm Tanya. I'm 16 years old and I would like to write the next Manic Street Preachers cover story." They were a reasonably new band at the time, and we had put them on the cover. And I said, I sort of laughed and said, "Yeah, I'm really glad you do, but obviously I have a team of about, you know, 12 writers here, all of whom want to write it, so it will be one of those, but thanks for calling." And she said, "Yes, but they're all journalists, you should get a fan to write it." And I didn't let her, I didn't say, "Yes, that's a brilliant idea, you should do it." I should have done, obviously. But we stayed in touch, I went up to Sheffield a year later and we met and had a chat, and she ended up going to Melody Maker ironically, who were obviously more open-minded than I was. And she now is, she certainly was at The Guardian, their China correspondent, she went out into China and wrote all of their stories about China. She'd done all of that and I remember her from 16, and if only I'd empowered her.

KA: I thought you were going to say, "And she's now my wife."

AC: No. Wrong country, too far, I'm not going to live in China. Okay, so hands up then, let's see what we've got. That was the first hand up, so you first but you have to wait for the mic. Oh it's gone there, since the mics there we'll come to you second.

Q: Hi, thank you both for coming out on a Sunday, appreciated. I was just wondering with the closure of BBC Three and it going kind of digital and online how much of your slate are you thinking about doing digital, and how much of that is the way everything seems to be slanting for you guys?

KA: I don't think we think, so this is what I think, I think it's the programme not the platform ultimately. So I don't really give a monkeys whether it's digital or what it is, it's just programming. I don't think people think Netflix has gone digital, it's

just the platform, so I don't care. I think that the amount of money that the BBC is spending on programming for younger audiences is a worry, and hopefully the demise of the BBC as a terrestrial channel won't affect that, but there are some obviously big issues at the BBC. Fundamentally I think it's just the programmes, you know if you build it they will come as the quote goes. And I think it's just if the show's good enough, the audience will find it, so we don't think like that. In fact, I'll tell you what we think at the moment is, say something gets cancelled, I don't know one of the shows we've made, we're thinking about crowd-funding them going forward. Because we don't really care if Sky don't want to make 'Project X', we'll see whether the audience wants us to make it. And that's what, I think that's exciting about digital, is if you've been on television and there's an audience there, and the broadcaster for whatever reason decide that they don't want to do it, well maybe we can crowd fund it in some fun exciting way that's more collaborative with the fan base. That feels like the digital future.

AC: So that is all good news really.

KA: It's all good news.

AC: Yes, it's all good news on a Sunday.

KA: The bad news is, I was actually with, I was at some BBC roundtable thing the other day and what's alarming for lots of independent production companies, which is good news for you, is that there is a drop off in the number of people applying to indies, as hard as you may find that to believe, it's true. And there's a lot of, I think because of the digital revolution there's a lot of people going to Vice, wanting to work for Vice or wanting to work for Maker Studios or want to work for Refinery 43 or whatever it's called. What's it called? 29, thank you. You're their target customer, I can see. So indies are actually finding that they're not getting, and particularly independent production companies that have a large requirement on people, so the bigger you know factual and entertainment producers, there's a definite drop off as other more interesting things, in your minds, come

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up. So I wouldn't, this is a real thing for the traditional independent production company model at the moment.

AC: You've got your own microphone now.

Q: I know, I've got one. Thank you for that, it was really interesting. I was wondering, how involved are you in the casting process itself, and do you enjoy that part?

KA: Yeah, the casting process, this is how involved I am. Choose the casting director, some that we work with that we like a lot, or there's maybe some new people that we want to give a go to. We choose the casting director and then agree the list of actors that are going to come in to read for the part, if they are going to read. Often these days bigger actors will only take offers, but if you're going to meet actors, actresses, then I would appoint the casting director, meet with the director and the casting director, agree the list of actors that will come in. I won't be in the auditions, the director and producer will be in the auditions, but then I will watch what they say are the kind of best five or six from whatever has been shot for that part. And then with the director and producer and the broadcaster, make the decision on the casting process.

AC: Down on the front row, not too far away.

Q: Hi guys. What was your greatest setback, whether it was in production or in life, and how did you overcome it? You can say, "Fuck off you cheeky Welsh bastard, I'm not going to answer that."

KA: I wouldn't say that, it's not a cheeky question. I think in life, my greatest setback was being sacked, actually. I got sacked at an early age, about 23, I was out of work for about six months, thought that was it.

AC: Who sacked you?

KA: I'm not going to go into it.

Q: How did you overcome that? Did you just think, right, I'm just going to focus?

KA: Alcohol helped quite a lot. I, do you know actually, how I overcame it was by picking myself up off the floor and then talking to everybody I could possibly find who might help me. At some stage a chap called Andy Harris, who we mentioned earlier on, went, "Oh, come on then. You can't be that rubbish, and come and do this." That's why I went to Manchester, worked in the entertainment department there on a quiz show called *Lucky Numbers*, which is where I met Shane Richie.

Q: And you got lucky?

KA: Yeah, I think luck, yeah definitely, you need a bit of luck. It's you know, what is it, five percent hard work and 95 percent luck is the phrase. But you make your own luck.

Q: Yeah, thank you very much Kenton, thanks Andrew, thank you.

AC: There's, well there's two up on the aisle here, so we can go to one after the other.

Q: Hello. You just said how you've been giving a lot of opportunities to newcomers and people with new ideas, and also you were getting into one side of the industry and then side-stepping into TV. But I'm an editor and I've noticed a lot of the time that now on TV, producers want to hire people who have done the same thing, and they're not really giving opportunities to other people.

KA: What sort of things do you edit?

Q: I edit feature films and promos.

KA: Okay, and what do you want to do?

Q: I want to do more TV comedies and dramas.

KA: Right, but you haven't got any comedy on your CV?

Q: I do, but not on TV. So because I don't have any broadcasting credits they don't...

KA: Yeah, it's a common project. Common project, common problem.

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The sort of people you're describing are known as CV whores, who just look at the list of credits that has gone before them and don't really talk to the person. So I think you've got to try and, have you got an agent?

Q: That's what they say as well, because I don't have broadcast credits, so they thought I couldn't...

KA: Well try and get an agent who can help you, get you in front of directors. I would volunteer your services. There's always low budget things being made everywhere and people need people to do some comedy for not very much money, so you can do some stuff that's for your own good outside of your being paid to work, just so you can get those credits on your reel. I think agents are really, really helpful, and that if you're talented an agent will spot it and help you, introduce you to directors. There's always people who want talented people to help them do things, so looking for where those other productions are that need editors. There's hundreds of short films being made that all need editors, so I'd be looking to volunteer services. There's that very, is it Shooting People, that very good short film website, I think it's called Shooting People. If you go on there there will be people going, "Does anybody know any editors? I've got a comedy film, a comedy half hour," which is quite good for short films that needs an editor. I'd go, "Me, I can do it," and then you'll have something to show me or your agent or whoever else that you can cut comedy.

AC: And two rows back.

Q: I know BBC have started doing a lot of like diverse dramas, do you think there's like a huge market after like *Empire*, do you think that's the new thing to go into?

KA: I think it's a really interesting question, I think...

Q: Did you have any hesitations as well about going for like black...

KA: No, no, I don't think there's any hesitations in giving talented writers from wherever they come from, the

opportunity to write what they want to write about. I think that in this country, unlike in North America, the economic power of the BAME audience is not as great as it is in the United States. And in the United States the model has changed since the spending power of the African American and Latin American audiences has got bigger and bigger and bigger, and has affected how people programme networks, commercial networks that set advertising, because they've realised that Latin American community is the fastest growing in North America, and now the value of the black dollar as it's called is huge, so that's why having you know diverse casts makes commercial sense. Here it's still not quite as it should be, so there are all these other initiatives going on to give more opportunities and more diverse writers and directors and actors, it's sort of societal I think, because I think ultimately your shows should reflect the audiences that are watching them, and as our society becomes more and more diverse then surely our programmes should become more and more diverse. But there is a great lack of writers. Most writers are like him. Lovely people but are white, middlish class men. So we don't have, we don't have enough Michaela Coel, *Chewing Gum*, yeah. Or Daniel Lawrence Taylors, you know there's not enough diversity in writing, so if you think you've got a writing itch and you come from a BAME background then scratch that itch because there's a huge, huge, huge, huge lack of writers, and that's where it comes from. It's those stories that need to be told, I don't have that experience. I can spot the script potential, but it's this stories and that perspective that is lacking I think.

Q: And the best way to get into contact with somebody like you is just to ask for your email address or something like that?

KA: No, I could give you my email address, and I would give it to you afterwards, but not to everybody because then it will just make my life even more complicated. The truth of it is that if you are a writer, and I think there are 70 or 80 literary agents in the UK that specialise in screenwriting, so there's an

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awful lot of people out there looking for new, young talent. So if you haven't got an agent, whose job is to sort of do a filtering process, you've got to ask yourself why really. So that's why lots of companies say we don't take submissions from members of the public. There's an ecology here which is 78 agencies, so whatever that is, 500 agents scouring theatres, fringe theatres, submissions that come in, cold submissions, you all the colleges, all the schools, all the screenwriting courses, everything. All these people make money out of very talented writers, and they're motivated to find them. So if you haven't got an agent, it's not because I don't want to, it's just like, it might be too early for you to be approaching a producer. There's another ecology there which is the world of agents, who are forces for good. A good agent will give you fantastic advice, read your material at an early stage, give you brilliant feedback and help your career. They're not just there to take 10-15 percent of your hard-earned money, they're there to build you and grow you as a writer.

AC: And they only get to take that percentage when you've gotten you some work.

KA: They put in a lot of time for no money whatsoever, so don't, please don't demonise them. The cliché of the avaricious agents are nonsense, they are incredibly powerful, powerful in a good way, force for good, and for great creativity.

Q: Thank you.

AC: It's quarter past so we have to end, because it's a strict programme and lots of other stuff to be done. So, well thank you all for being out here, you know you're the good people, but a big round of applause for Kenton Allen.

[Applause]