

Jonathan Powell – a life in the media

Originally published in The Orbital, student newspaper at Royal Holloway, University of London.

April 12, 2010. Ashley Coates.

Before joining Royal Holloway, first as a lecturer, then as Head of Department for Media Arts, Jonathan Powell enjoyed a prestigious career in television drama. After a period at Granada, Powell moved to the BBC, rising to become Head of Drama and then Controller of BBC One. It was during this time that he oversaw the production of some of the best drama output ever to have come out of the UK.

It is a testament to the quality of the Media Arts department that Jonathan Powell came to work here after more than 25 years in drama production. He credits the collaborative, collegiate, atmosphere and working amongst impressive academics. But he reserves the greater portion of his praise for the built environment. "I like it down here. I like my office, and I like it partially because it looks exactly like the office I worked in 25 years ago producing drama for the BBC."

Powell did not grow up with an absolute certainty that drama was his calling, his enthusiasm for the industry was stimulated by an experience he had when he was 17 at a theatre in Venice. "For some reason which I still don't understand, I decided to go. I was sitting there and it was so incredible; I remember leaving the theatre that night and thinking: that's what I want to do. I hadn't work it out but I knew, I want to do things like that, I want to put them on".

A year later Powell was part of the second ever intake at the University of East Anglia, studying English and American Literature. The newly built campus lacked a theatre so plays were put on in bars and outdoor areas. He was accepted into the highly competitive Granada production trainee scheme and soon found himself producing television drama at a very early age.

It was the move to Manchester that kept him from continuing at Granada and Powell joined the BBC at Shepherd's Bush. It was there that Powell produced probably his most famous work, Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy with Alec Guinness, star of The Bridge over the River Kwai, Lawrence of Arabia and Star Wars. A few months ago the series made the Guardian's list of the 'best ever TV drama series'.

True to his on-screen appearance, Guinness kept his cool when he was on set, but he was able to manipulate events. Powell describes Alec Guinness's reaction to casting Simone Signoret in another one of his productions, Smiley's People.

"I thought I better ask Alec before casting her and we talked about her part. I mentioned that there would be a scene where she would have to be knocked over by a car. 'A car?', he responded, 'with the size she is these days you're going to need a tank!' So Alec had this very subtle way of telling you what he thought should be done".

Powell worked with a number of other high profile actors including Alan Rickman. Industry giants Alan Yentob and Michael Grade were also close colleagues. As well as producing sophisticated award-winning dramas, he is responsible for the launch of both EastEnders and Casualty.

By the time Jonathan Powell came to consider joining Royal Holloway, he had worked for the BBC and commercial television for more than 20 years. The BBC in particular had changed a lot during that time, the emphasis on public service gradually waned as more out-of-house productions were commissioned. There began to be more interference upon in-house productions, in an effort to make the BBC more efficient and more 'relevant to the license fee payer'.

For Jonathan, the sense of the BBC as an open creative forum was lost
“When I was there, there was a public service ethos, you did not get paid the same amount as you would in commercial television, by a long chalk actually. On the other hand what you got was an incredible freedom to follow your instincts and do interesting things, so life was interesting.”

Jonathan Powell continues to receive recognition for his work in production. More recently his past work has attracted interest from Hollywood with a remake of the Edge of Darkness “..which was a fabulous nuclear thriller that what’s his name, film-star thingy...Mel Gibson has just remade into a movie!”