

THE WITCH

IN 2022, DANNY ROBINS WROTE ONE OF THE MOST CHILLING DOCU-DRAMAS EVER IN THE WITCH

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TORTHING UP



FARM. NOW, HE'S BRINGING THIS WALES-SET GHOST STORY TO BBC1, IN HIS TV SCREENWRITING DEBUT...

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Uncanny writer Danny Robins helms the series.



IT'S 17 JUNE 2026 AND *SFX* is at Dragon Studios in Bridgend, Wales. Or shall we say it's summer 2026 *outside*, but on set, it's more winter 1989, complete with vintage Ribena bottles, chunky VHS players, cathode ray TV sets and an avocado-hued bathroom. An atomically accurate recreation of a rustic country cottage at the dawn of the '90s, it's a fully immersive walk-through, only with no natural light, there's a feeling of something unsettling going on, which is apt given what's been filming here for the past six weeks.

We're in Wales for *The Witch Farm*, a new supernatural spookfest from the pen of Danny Robins. You may well have heard of him. It's rare on a shoot that its writer is the most famous face in the building, but this former stand-up has become quite the superstar since his *Uncanny* podcast (later a TV series and live show) exploded a while back. That series has spawned a multitude of spinoffs and sister series, including 2022's *The Witch Farm*. Through nine part-drama, part-documentary episodes, this podcast told the story of Bill and Liz Rich, who, after moving into a remote cottage (named Heol Fanog) in the Brecon Beacons, started to experience strange phenomena – loud footsteps, extreme hot and cold spots in different parts of the house, unexplainable aromas, and their electricity meter spinning wildly out of control. What followed over the next few years was even worse, leading to... well, just watch and see.

This series is a big deal for Robins. His first scripted screen drama, it's a very different beast to its podcast sibling (shorter, no documentary inserts), with the aim being, he tells us, that it can be enjoyed by an audience more used to *Broadchurch* or *Line Of Duty* than *American Horror Story*.

"The challenge is to scare, but not scare too much," he says, sitting opposite *SFX*, sans red anorak, but with that trademark Britpop barnet perfectly in place. "At the same time, though, you don't want to deliver something that feels diluted. The other challenge was condensing this amazing story into these four hours of television, because it was quite vast and sprawling. It takes place over several years with this incredible array of phenomena, so making that story make sense over four episodes was challenging, but exciting."

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

The Battersea Poltergeist, which told the story of an alleged haunting in '50s London, was the first of Robins's multi-part podcasts for the BBC, a "once in a lifetime story", as he calls it. After it was a ratings mega-hit, Robins set off to look for a "twice in a lifetime story", finding it via a book by investigative journalist Mark Chadbourn titled *Testimony*. Captivated by the story and astounded that the events at Heol Fanog weren't better known, Robins arranged to meet Liz Rich (Bill had passed away, a victim of alcoholism, some years before), who he describes as "a very interesting, charismatic, strong woman who went through something deeply strange and frightening. Whether you think that it was a genuinely paranormal experience or something that was the product of hysteria, environment or imagination, doesn't take away from the compellingness of this human drama".

On set, Gabrielle Creevy, who plays Liz, and Michael Socha (Bill) are waiting for a take. Sporting a shaggy beard and a weathered fisherman's jumper straight from the Millets '89 collection, Socha looks very different from his well-groomed character in BBC1's *The Cage*.

Action!

"Why would Madeline stay in a house that scared her so much?" Bill asks, referring to the cottage's previous owner. "Clap of thunder!" shouts someone off-camera. Bill looks out of the window. "Maybe," replies Liz, "she didn't have a choice...?"

The Port Talbot-born Creevy is the only cast member here to have actually met their counterpart. Liz was an invaluable collaborator on the podcast, and remains supportive of this dramatisation, with Robins claiming that the whole family – there's also daughter Rebecca and stepson Laurence – "are excited to see their story come to life this way."

"She was lovely," Creevy says of her get-together with the real-world Liz. "Sometimes when you're portraying someone, it depends what the team wants, whether they want me to really look like her, talk like her, walk like her... But I don't think that was the point of this. It was just about her telling her and Bill's story. Any questions, she'd answer them."

When it comes to the leads' attitudes to the paranormal, Socha says he's "100% sceptic", while Creevy edges more into Team Believer than Team Sceptic, telling us "I do feel like there was something in that house". *The Witch Farm*, it seems, welcomes both viewpoints. All of Robins's shows are careful not to offer definitive answers to "paranormal activity", with even their presenter describing himself as "a sceptic who wants to believe".

So how does Robins maintain that ambiguity in a show-don't-tell medium? On audio, you don't have to commit yourself by depicting actual ghosts or furniture shifting around the room of its own accord, allowing the listener to come to their own conclusions.


The happy couple, before any ghostly business.


Bill and Max turn up the heat in the fashion stakes.


Jeremy Swift as professional ghost hunter Eddie Burks.

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Gabrielle Creevy leads the show as Liz Rich.



Lewin Lloyd's Jonathan gets a taste of the countryside.

"I've always dealt in ambiguity – that grey area between belief and scepticism," Robins says. "What the docudrama podcast can do is give you sceptic theories, and then give you moments which seem like it confirms that it's genuinely paranormal. Clearly, though, if four hours into a television series there are no ghosts, people are going to be disappointed. But my modus operandi has always been to be inclusive, to draw in people who don't believe in ghosts as much as people who do, and you'll find that here. You need the real world to feel scary, that idea that the threats to your characters can come from real sources, from other characters within, from things going on in their lives, from the possibility that they're disintegrating mentally. Uncertainty is the most frightening thing for human beings, more frightening than ghosts."

GHOST STORIES

As Robins says, if you want ghosts, you've got ghosts. *SFX* is behind a monitor watching what will likely be one of the series' most talked-about jump scares, as a spectre in 19th century dress, blood dripping down his face, scurries behind Liz. And there's another ghost milling about on set, waiting for her scene, only we'll keep that one spoiler-free. But whether these apparitions are real or exist only in the minds of these characters is for us to decide.

The sceptical argument for the events at Heol Fanog goes like this: that it was Liz and Bill's mental health issues that explain what happened. Bill's previous marital breakdown, Liz's history of depression, a traumatic home birth, and the isolation of a remote farmhouse caused them to hallucinate everything that went on there.

When we ask Robins what his own take is, he's careful not to commit himself. His objective here, he stresses, is to focus on the Rich family, and the connection between "people and place".

"I think there was something about this house and Liz and Bill and their relationship with it that produced this cocktail of strange and frightening events," he says. "As an audience, it's exciting, but there's also a profound sadness, particular to Bill in that journey towards self-destruction. I find it a deeply moving story, and the more I've got to know the family, the more it feels personal."

> **"I've always dealt in ambiguity – that grey area between belief and scepticism"**

As we tour the rooms of Heol Fanog, faithfully recreated 50 miles from the actual cottage, Robins's joy at being on this sound stage, for his first screen drama, is plain to see. "This really doesn't feel like a set at all," he enthuses, with a broad smile. "It's a proper house and yeah, I feel deeply privileged to see it come to life in this way."

It all seems like a big vote of confidence, especially for a first-time TV writer.

"I feel so lucky, and the BBC have been brilliant," he beams. "There's clearly a big audience out there now for these kinds of stories. You know, someone came up to me one time and said, 'Thank you for talking about this again.' We'd stopped talking about these things. For a long time, our imaginative space was taken up with *The Lord Of The Rings* and *Star Wars* and *The Avengers*, which have quite prescribed boundaries. The world of ghosts and the paranormal is this infinite dark universe of mystery, and I think the audience that enjoy *Uncanny*, they love plunging back into that. It's deeply nostalgic for a lot of people, remembering those mysteries of their childhood, the things they read about in books or watched on TV, and I think there's also a huge younger audience out there who are finding out about the paranormal on TikTok."

With two of 2026's biggest movies – *Backrooms* and *Obsession* – being tales of terror, and *Uncanny* one of BBC Sounds' most streamed podcasts, Robins believes the climate is right for more paranormal-themed shows, and he's pleased that it's the BBC – the home of *Ghostwatch*, *A Ghost Story For Christmas* and *The Stone Tape* – that's spearheading this revival of all things phantasmal. "It's clearly gone well with *Uncanny*," he says, "and I'm pleased that they've allowed us this chance to tell a supernatural thriller in dramatic form."

And should *The Witch Farm* do well, and the Beeb want more from Robins, he has plans.

"Making my *Uncanny Cold Cases* series recently, I thought that this treatment would suit a lot of those stories," he teases. "Making *The Witch Farm* has been a great experience, and one I'd like to repeat."

The Witch Farm is on BBC One and iPlayer in November.

SOCHA

WE TALK TO THE FORMER *MISFITS* STAR ABOUT PLAYING THE MYSTERIOUS BILL RICH

Bill comes across as quite an unknowable character in the podcast. Was it hard to get a handle on him?
I listened to the podcast and then I also met Liz Rich. I mean, we'd always talk about Bill, and he was definitely quite a mysterious figure. Yeah, I could never really fucking figure him out. Because it's a ghost story, it's always a bit "Is it, isn't it?". I just had to focus on a few ideas rather than a definite idea.

This set is so immersive, and creates quite an eerie atmosphere. Was that something you felt?
I thought this was going to be one of those shoots where something supernatural is always happening, do you know what I mean? I thought we were all going to walk away from this scarred, but nothing happened – I was massively disappointed.

So what are your thoughts on what happened in that cottage in the '90s? Was it natural or supernatural?
I don't necessarily think Bill and Liz were lying, I just think they were going through something. I don't think it was ghosts, but I'm also open to the fact that I could be fucking wrong. I'm not completely closing it off and saying, "You're talking shit, it wasn't a ghost, sort your heads out," it's just I've never experienced anything like that.

Gabrielle Creevy plays your wife Liz. How was it working with her?
I noticed when I did the read-through that Gabby was just a fantastic actor. We had such a good laugh, which I think you need with this subject matter. We were often in giggles, which happens sometimes when you're in this high pressure scene environment. Yeah, she's amazing.



Michael Socha co-stars as Liz's artist husband Bill.

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