

Dirty, funny and true: *Horrible Histories*

A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD BRADLEY*

You are actually coming more from the factual side, not from children's television.

Bradley: Yes, I was working in a factual, documental department at the BBC before establishing my own production company with 2 colleagues.

Children's television really has been something we have approached from the content, so we started off in the last few years. I studied history at university, I've ended up making a lot of history programmes of all sorts: everything from Egypt to the Medici or Ancient China. And while making history documentaries we started to become more and more interested in the details, the gritty, dirty details of history. And it led us towards *Horrible Histories* which is our first outing into children's television. But it is at heart a history programme, a history comedy programme.

How did you come up with the idea for Horrible Histories?

Bradley: I was sitting together with one of my 3 sons. My 10-year-old was reading these books called *Horrible Histories* which have sold many million copies in Britain. And he said: "Dad, you do all these history programmes. Why have you never thought about making *Horrible Histories*?" And I said: "Hmm, good idea!" So I went off and talked to the publishers and the writer of the books, Terry Deary, and I said: "I love the books. I think they would really work as a live-action comedy show." And he said: "Well, that's great because they did make an animation show, but it didn't work." And I said: "I would love to make them. What do you think is important about these books?" And he said: "There are 3 things you need to



Ill. 1: The actors in *Horrible Histories* need to be versatile and creative and be able to take on many parts from being a king to being a peasant

know about *Horrible Histories*: One is that it is horrible, disgusting, dirty and naughty. Two is that it is factually true and factually accurate. And three is that it is funny." That was the brief from the publisher and from Terry Deary.

How did you find the actors?

Bradley: We needed people who are very versatile, and we also wanted to create the idea of a company of actors who could take on many parts and become many different historical characters, from being a peasant to a king, from Queen Elizabeth I. to Joan of Arc. We needed people who were very flexible and good comic actors (Ill. 1). We hoped that we would create a group of actors who in turn would become famous for this moment in time when they all came together for *Horrible Histories*. The producer, the director – all working in adult comedy – auditioned lots of comic actors. And so we came up with 5 or 6 core actors who we thought had enough range and flexibility to play

all these historical characters that we wanted them to do.

How is a show of Horrible Histories made?

Bradley: We start with researchers who create a great volume of historical facts that we think are going to produce interesting ideas. We have a group of about 8 or 10 writers that write for the show and 2 or 3 who write a lot of the material. And they come together every week in a writers' meeting and we brainstorm the ideas which they then take away and they write the sketches. The sketches come back and then the series' producer Caroline Norris, who has got a very good comedy brain, and the director Dominic Brigstocke look at the scripts, fine-tune them and draft them until they think they are really good strong sketches.

At that point we give them to the actors. The actors tend to come in 2 or 3 weeks before our shoot for rehearsals. There is a huge amount to learn be-

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cause we shoot an enormous amount in a day. We shoot 8 or 10 minutes of material in a day, or sometimes more than that. And so they have 3 or 4 weeks of rehearsal. There are songs, monologues and sketches to learn. And then we go into a 7- or 8-week shooting period.

We start the same way every time: we start with 4 weeks on location. We go out on the road and go to locations not far from London because the budget is not big enough to allow us to spend lots of money in hotels. But we find historical locations that we think can work. For Ancient Egypt it may be a sand quarry, or some piece of wasteland that might do as the Wild West in America. Or we go to historical houses – we are very fortunate to have a lot of them in Britain – to palaces or to manor houses and we will do a whole series of sketches there for days. So we do a month like that and then we go into the studio for another 3 weeks or so. It is very intense. And by the end everybody is completely exhausted, particularly the people with the costumes and the makeup because they are changing all the time, sticking on facial hair and then ripping it off and putting on the next costumes. So they work very hard. But that's it: a 7-week shoot. And by the end of that the actors need a holiday.

Why is it funny?

Bradley: Well, that is the million-pound question! The truth of it is, in Britain, we have a long tradition of laughing at figures in power, and kings and queens. It is something that makes us feel stronger somehow if we can laugh at those characters in the past. Yes, that is one of the things: we like to laugh at people in authority and bring them down to our level. The other thing is that all children around the world find a humour in rude things – farting, people falling over or going to the toilet. When children go round a castle or a palace they want to find out: “Where did they eat? Where did they go to the toilet? Where are the dungeons? How did they die?” In *Horrible Histories*, there is a honesty about it, and in a way there is something naughty which makes it funny. And then I think the humour is very clever, as well as being obvious sometimes.

Take one of our famous kings, Charles II., who came after a very puritanical period. No one was allowed to enjoy themselves before Charles II. came: Christmas was banned, football matches were banned, theatre was banned. People were serious Christians, expected to be modest in their dress. Then Charles II. arrived and it was a time for partying and for enjoying yourself. So we created this character

of Charles II. as the king who brought back partying. And the genius of one of our writers was to say: “What if we make him a rap star, and he does a rap like Eminem?” And to see a king doing a rap saying “I’m the king who brought back partying” is very funny. I think anywhere in the world they might find that funny. They may not know who Charles II. was, but to see a king doing a rap is funny (Ill. 2). So I think humour comes partly from making fun of people in power, partly from laughing at obvious things that used to happen in the past that we find a bit naughty, and partly from it being smart.

And one of the things I think is very important is that children – particularly the older age-group of children – do not have enough smart television that is made for them, that doesn't patronise them, that doesn't treat them like school pupils, that doesn't make them feel like they are back in the classroom, but that excites them. We think one of the reasons why it is so successful is that this is a show that young people feel has been written for them and it takes them seriously, and they enjoy the fact that it is a bit naughty.

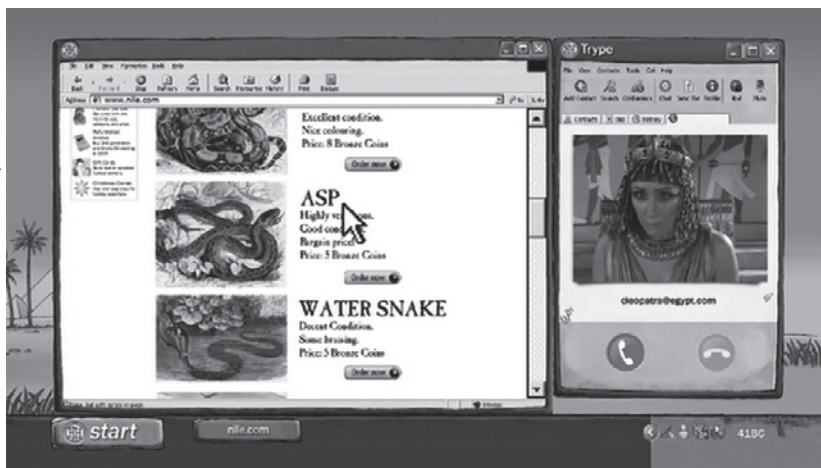
I presented the show in different countries. And most of the viewers were like “This is typically British!” What is the typically British part in it?

Bradley: I think the British part is partly about not being overly reverent about our leaders. I don't think in America, for instance, they would laugh at their former presidents in the same way. We only have to take one look at Henry VIII., a man who after all not only had many people executed, but he had 6 wives who he divorced and beheaded and married ... We find that comical. It was actually brutal behaviour but at least we deal with it by finding it comical. So I think it has to do with the fact that we find our history is a great source of comic stories and comedy. That other thing that is British is that we enjoy being rude and we don't mind that a lot of our



Screenshot from *Horrible Histories* © BBC, UK

Ill. 2: Creative and appealing to youths: Charles II performs the rap song “King of Bling” saying that he brought back partying after a puritanical period



Ill. 3: Creativity in the detail: in *Horrible Histories* historical facts or stories are sometimes transferred to modern times. Here: Cleopatra orders the asp for her suicide online

humour is quite edgy, which means being at the edge of being acceptable. *Horrible Histories* is a bit edgy, it makes you think “Can they really say that? Can they really show that?” I am very proud that we live in a society where we can both show that and enjoy it. And the truth of it is that it is not just for no reason. Everything you see in *Horrible Histories* happened, we are not making things up. It is a way of also getting people to understand how the past was. And that is a good aim if you can get young people excited about history. And I bet you can do it better by comedy than by a serious history lesson in a dull book.

Are there any subjects you deliberately avoid?

Bradley: There are subjects that we just will not touch like slavery or the Holocaust. There are subjects which are too painful for people, where our writers – no matter their genius – cannot find the funny side of it and don’t feel that it is appropriate. I can tell you one sketch which gave me a degree of discomfort, but in the end we made a film about the Hitler Youth. And the punchline was as if they were making an advert to join the Hitler Youth, and the line at the end was: “It is like the Boy Scouts, only evil.” Of course, that is quite an edgy thing to say and that

was about as far as we went. But people found the sketch very funny and it was dealing with a very important point for young people about why people joined up to the Hitler Youth.

We had an instance where we were not expecting to get into difficulties with the BBC, but we did. We had a sketch about Cleopatra and imagined that she lived in the days of modern computers and so she was skyping Marc Antony. It is a very funny sketch. But at the end of it you realise that the Romans are coming to get Cleopatra and Marc Antony, and she isn’t going to survive. And they are chatting and Marc Antony stabs himself in a comedy moment and Cleopatra goes online trying to buy a snake to poison herself (Ill. 3). We got into difficulties because at that time there were a number of children in Britain who had been joining networks online where they were talking to each other about suicide. And so the people at the BBC were very concerned there might be an issue about suicide. But we said to the BBC: “Listen, everybody knows that Cleopatra died like this, or historians believe that she died like this, and I don’t think any kid is going to go online trying to buy an asp.” There are a lot of issues, but in a way we think about: “Is it funny? Is it appropriate? And is it true?” Those are the guiding principles.

What would you recommend producers all over the world if they wanted to make a funny show?

Bradley: I would suggest you think yourself back to what it was like to be 10 or 11 years old, and look at what makes the children laugh. If you watch what makes them laugh and you think about what their sense of humour is, that is a starting point. I think it is very sad in a way that all of the comedy talents produce for adults and make stuff that is inappropriate for children to watch because it has sexual content or it has swearing or whatever. I think it is really exciting to think about what you can make that is for children, that comes to them where they are, that doesn’t patronise them, that doesn’t feel like you’re being a school teacher. Children inhabit our world and they are trying to make sense of a lot of crazy stuff: the news every day, what is going on in the Middle East or a tsunami that has just broken out in Japan. There is a lot of stuff in their lives, in their homes. Some of the children may be dealing with very difficult circumstances in their domestic lives. Not every child lives in a perfect home. And I think acknowledging that life is messy and crazy and a bit anarchic and making them laugh about it is a really great thing. Because I think through laughter comes a sense of recognition and a sense of feeling better about yourself. I wish more producers would think about comedy for this age group because they are not well served on television. Anyone who is interested and thinking about it, I would suggest it as a great place to be because there are not too many success stories. ■

* Richard Bradley is the Managing Director and one of the founders of Lion Television, London, Great Britain, and the executive producer of *Horrible Histories*.

