



Steel and booming bonhomie: Russell T Davies photographed for the New Statesman at Bafta, London, in April 2018

“Living as a gay man is a political act”

The former *Doctor Who* writer Russell T Davies on hate mail, two decades of writing gay characters – and adapting the Jeremy Thorpe scandal for the BBC

By Helen Lewis

Russell T Davies in full flow is a magnificent sight. In two hours, we’ve covered *Black Panther* (“revolutionary”), *Little Dorrit* (“you cry your eyes out”) and science fiction fans who have a problem with a female lead in *Doctor Who* (“get out of the light; simply get out of the way”). Alternative careers have been discussed – cartooning, yes; university teaching, no. (“I’d sleep with them! I’d be in court within a week!”) Multiple cups of tea have been drunk. I’ve eaten a handful of the praline balls I bought as a gift.

As our conversation sails on, Davies’s husband, Andrew, is tenderly dispatched to the dentist down the road. He is still recovering from his seventh craniotomy after being diagnosed with brain cancer in 2011; this is only the fifth or sixth time since the operation that he’s been out alone.

In the television industry, Davies is known by his initials – RTD – and decorative versions of the letters sit on a bookshelf in the dining room here in his house in a Manchester suburb. The T doesn’t stand for anything; he added it to distinguish himself from a radio presenter with the same name.

At 55, Davies admits he is happily settled into the “post-*Doctor Who*” phase of his career, having graduated to the beloved BBC

series after storylining soaps for Granada, then writing his own shows. Placing *Dr Who* into the hands of the man who wrote 1999’s groundbreaking gay drama *Queer as Folk* was inevitably controversial. “‘Doctor Queer’ was the headline. What do you do? You just laugh,” he says. In any case, his tenure was a huge success, attracting average audiences of more than 7.5 million.

After five years in charge, he left *Who* in 2010, and headed for Los Angeles, only to return to Britain suddenly when Andrew’s cancer was diagnosed: “The moment you get free of *Doctor Who* and think, ‘Oh, the world is mine’, life throws something at you.” Friends say Davies didn’t enjoy Hollywood all that much anyway: he lived in Venice Beach, by the sea, where it’s cooler. He is back now in the modest semi-detached house he’s owned for two decades. Its kitchen – painted red by the production company – is where poor old Phil collapsed and died from a drug overdose in the third episode of *Queer as Folk*.

Now, Davies has adapted a book about the Jeremy Thorpe affair, *A Very English Scandal*, for the BBC. Directed by Stephen Frears, and starring Hugh Grant and Ben Whishaw, it’s the kind of luxury event television that justifies the licence fee.

That in itself is quite a departure for

someone who has always prioritised pleasing audiences over impressing critics. I’m surprised to discover Davies has only five Baftas (which, I can reveal, he doesn’t keep in his downstairs loo – sorry, but there was a lot of tea). “I do get called melodramatic and I do get called sentimental sometimes,” he says. The producer Nicola Shindler, who has worked with him several times, says his embrace of emotion has caused problems with commissioning editors. “There’s sometimes a pushback that he isn’t – not, intellectual... but he doesn’t tackle things as an argument, he tackles things as an emotional discovery.”

Then again, the writer he most admires is Charles Dickens. “It’s that size of character – huge and baroque and exaggerated and full of catchphrases and habits: that’s real life as far as I’m concerned.” For him, the two emblematic modes of drama are represented by *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*: the first is “all the demotic, it’s hard, it’s blunt, it’s working-class; in *Coronation Street*, it’s funny women in spangly jumpers. Life is more like that, I think.”

The year is 1994. A brief, chaste lesbian kiss on *Brookside* in January has provoked thunderclaps of outrage and much

... hand-wringing. It also prompts actor Anna Friel to turn down further lesbian roles until 2017's *The Girlfriend Experience*, for fear of being typecast and ruining her career. Behind the scenes at Granada, though, Russell T Davies is accomplishing a dozen tiny revolutions. "Whatever I worked on, I put a gay character in. I put a lesbian vicar into a show. I put gay teenagers into *Children's Ward*."

In 1997 he got a job on a period drama called *The Grand*, set in a hotel in the 1920s and starring Susan Hampshire. For one episode, he decided to junk the usual four running plots and focus on a single story: a gay barman. "My writing literally, radically,

its window-shattering sense of not giving a fuck.

Within the first ten minutes there's an orgasm and the arrival of a new baby. (The orgasm – Nathan's – happens while Stuart is hearing about the arrival of the baby, the phone held in his *other* hand.) Drugs are taken, Stuart's car is spray-painted with homophobic graffiti and Vince pulls a man who turns out to be wearing a plastic six-pack mould under his T-shirt, covering a generous belly. This was gay life without shame and without apology.

I was captivated by *Queer as Folk* when it first aired, because I was the same age as Nathan – 15 – and his story is that of a teen-

needed to be made, he had to get out and defend them, too. He has embraced the idea of being a "gay writer", not just a writer who also happens to be gay. Sometimes that role is a fun one: he tells his (usually straight and male) directors to shoot male characters the way they do women: "you've got to lower the bottom of the frame to include the crotch, because that's where your eye goes". Sometimes the responsibilities are more serious. One of the many future projects hovering in the background is what he describes as an "Aids drama", telling the story of "a generation being wiped out quietly while everyone just... all the straight world just carried on going to work and having their tea and watching the television".

In 2001, he bounced from *Queer as Folk* into another gay drama, *Bob and Rose*. It might be my favourite of Davies's work, simply for the unlikeliness of its subject matter as raw material for a romantic comedy. Bob (Alan Davies, in maximum puppy-dog mode) is a gay man. Rose (Lesley Sharp) is a straight woman. They fall in love.

Davies was attracted to the story because he was tired of TV executives trying to get him to write a more conventional tale: the midlife crisis of a married man who realises he is attracted to other men. But writing it forced him to overcome his own prejudices. "A friend of mine fell in love with a woman, and the prejudice that he faced from us gay men – and from me, I didn't believe it for a second, I thought he was mad, I thought he was having a nervous breakdown, I thought he wanted children, I thought she wanted his money."

He and his friends were "vile" about the relationship – "we'd meet each other on trains and sit there bitching about him" – until he finally sat down with the man and had an honest conversation. A bit drunk, at two in the morning, he asked him all the intrusive but fascinating questions that swirled around: how did they have sex? Was he still attracted to men? What happened when a hot guy walked in the room? "And he answered it all: he answered it all with 'love'. He simply loved her."

Again, though, some of the most vitriolic reaction came from the gay community. Davies tells me that ITV had to call the police over threats from men in Brighton. "I think they were just two men in a bedsit, but they called themselves a campaign." He laughs, because in 2001 sending death threats to a public figure was a relatively time-consuming and rare occurrence, rather than the work of a few seconds and the click of a button. "Vile letters, so women-hating, the worst I've ever seen," he says. "This is what they said: 'if a woman came between me and a man, I would turn her inside out

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improved in front of my eyes. And Granada didn't like it, not because it was gay, simply because it chucked out the rest of the cast. They were saying, 'look, we're paying Susan Hampshire £4,000 a week to be here, and you've given her two lines.'"

But Davies dug his heels in through endless "proper meetings" and eventually got his way. "I didn't know I was that strong, actually, to defend it that much. And that simply got noticed." One of the executives involved later moved to Channel 4, and she got in touch with him again. Given that he was better at writing gay characters than anything else, how about a whole show devoted to them?

The year is 1999. It is still only 32 years since male homosexuality stopped being a criminal offence in the UK, 17 years since Terrence Higgins became one of the first British men to die from Aids, and 11 years since the introduction of Section 28. It will be another year before the legislation is repealed in Scotland, and three more before the same happens in England and the Wales. A year earlier, the British Social Attitudes survey had found that only 23 per cent of us thought same-sex relationships were "not wrong at all". Thirty-nine per cent thought they were "always wrong".

Into this greyer, more conventional world exploded Stuart, Vince and Nathan. Watching the first episode of *Queer as Folk* now, the 1990s tropes stand out – the pop music stings, the inspirational loft conversation, the pieces to camera, perched on boy-band stools – but so does its sheer energy,

ager trying to establish his own identity. "Which isn't gay at all," Davies chips in. "It's why you were sitting there enjoying it. Not many programmes still today [show] the young clubbing, and not telling them off when they take drugs or get drunk. Television's still quite judgemental."

The sexual frankness of *Queer as Folk* would be less shocking if the series were commissioned today. "It was so radical. I don't think you can repeat it," says Matt Cain, former editor of the gay magazine *Attitude*, who was in his early 20s when it aired. "I didn't know what rimming was. But you can't imagine a 21-year-old now, with the internet, not knowing that. That shock factor is removed from any rewatching."

Davies wonders whether Nathan's age would now be a sticking point. In the US version, the character became 17 because the network refused to show underage sex. "They said, 'that's illegal'. You can show bank robberies, you can show murders. Television's about an awful lot of illegal stuff... if *Queer as Folk* was new now, I'd be having to defend that a lot harder."

The backlash from social conservatives was predictable, but few would have expected the reaction from the gay press who turned up to the launch, furious that the show did not explicitly tackle Aids. "That was a fuck of a press conference, that. People shouting at us, 200 people packed into a room; terrible, very volatile." He was resolute. Not every drama with straight people in it featured cancer, after all, so why should illness define gay life?

However, the experience taught him that if he wanted to make the shows he felt



Secrets and lies: Jeremy Thorpe, played by Hugh Grant, with his lover Norman Scott (Ben Whishaw)

through her own slit.' That's... wow."

Anyone who combines activism, or even a social conscience, with writing fiction or journalism will be familiar with the burden of representation. Since gay stories, or women's stories, or black stories are rarely told in popular culture, then the few who successfully tell them are subject to an often insane amount of scrutiny. From reactionaries, there are grumbles about political correctness going mad, but from your own side, there's an equally astringent push-back if you aim to deal in the complexities of real, human lives rather than portray saints, victims and martyrs. *Don't make us look bad in front of the world*, comes the unspoken message. "But a good writer doesn't write representation," says Nicola Shindler, whose company Red Productions made *Queer as Folk*. "They write character."

"Quite often, gay viewers and the gay community can react against one of their own revealing the less savoury, family-friendly aspects of many of our lives to a mainstream audience," Matt Cain tells me. "But the truth is he did it with sensitivity and heart. He never missed a chance to reveal that we didn't have the same lives: we didn't have the same age of consent, we couldn't adopt, there was a whole storyline about homophobia in the workplace." Or as Piers Wenger, controller of BBC drama, puts it over email: "He's superb at showing you who people really are as opposed to the version they want you to believe."

Davies admires the *Queer as Folk* viewers who identified themselves with amoral, pleasure-seeking, dangerous Stuart – because they were being honest with

themselves: "We all want to tell people to fuck off, and he just does it." He banned the word "evil" from *Doctor Who*, reasoning that it was reductive and argument-ending, and hates it when the TV news describes child abusers and murderers as "monsters", because it's a cop-out from trying to understand their motives.

Davies deals with the blizzard of criticism by staying offline – he doesn't do Twitter or Facebook, and his Instagram account mostly consists of semi-ironic photos taken with a large portrait of himself around his house in

"A good writer doesn't write representation, they write character"

Mumbles, near the Swansea suburb where he was born. Most of the mail that comes to his agent, he puts in the bin. "In 100 years' time, this is going to look fascinating, when we were all typing at each other," he says. "There will be period dramas made in 100 years' time where they'll laugh at us so much. There'll be footage of people at keyboards going, 'I hate you'. It will pass."

The year is 2005. *Brokeback Mountain* will come out in the autumn, and it is still considered "brave" for a straight actor to take a gay role – the risk of never playing a leading man again has to be counterbalanced by the possibility of an Oscar in recognition of your noble sacrifice.

On 26 March that year, a dusty, antiquated

old BBC show returns after a 25-year hiatus. The first episode of the new series of *Doctor Who* is called "Rose", a name Davies has returned to throughout his career. Over the next five years, he will write or rewrite almost every episode, as well as acting as executive producer on its spin-offs *Torchwood* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. As with his early work at Granada, there's gayness everywhere: the single line that reveals Lesley Sharp's character in "Midnight" is a lesbian; the outrageous camp of John Barrowman's Captain Jack; the way Christopher Eccleston's Ninth Doctor bestows exactly the same goodbye kiss on the lips on Jack as he does on Billie Piper's Rose.

Doctor Who was unlike any project Davies had taken on before. It was a juggernaut, and one which he could not have written entirely by himself even if he wanted to. The editor of the show's fan magazine, Benjamin Cook, later published a book of the emails he and Davies exchanged during its production. Called *The Writer's Tale*, it's a text I would recommend to anyone who wants to write for television. Not only is it brutally honest about the grind of delivering scripts, but Davies pays attention to all the other bits of show production that impinge on creative talents. A lost location leads to a last-minute rewrite; an actor is ill and drops out; a script from an outside contributor is not up to scratch. Davies admits that he "fell out with plenty of writers who didn't like being rewritten, and to this day, I'd go back and do exactly the same – rewrite them more, frankly".

This is the glimpse of steel beneath the booming bonhomie. In the industry, Davies is known for taking his avuncular role seriously (he is a devoted sender of congratulatory emails to passing acquaintances, and mentors several younger writers), but no one as successful as him can avoid the question of whether they have become Too Big To Take Notes.

Christopher Bidmead, who wrote for *Doctor Who* in the 1980s, once described him as "what I call a first draft writer. He sits down in the heat of the moment and churns out something that's delightful and inventive and wonderful. But writing's not about that. It's about going back into the script and cutting it, and shaping it. The problem is, Russell will put a first draft in the studio, because he can. He's in charge."

The Writer's Tale reveals that far from banging out scripts in an ecstatic stream of consciousness, Davies spent most of his time in charge of *Who* desperately fretting about deadlines, and procrastinating with the fervour known only to writers and people being encouraged to jump off the top diving board by their friends. However, →

in some cases, Bidmead's description is literally true. The first episode of *Bob and Rose*, Davies tells me, is the first draft: "I never changed a word, it just went ffff on to the paper like that. I was young, on fire – I'm full of doubt now."

More recently, one television producer tells me, most of Davies's peers believe that he should have refined the scripts of his 2015 series *Cucumber* harder. The show, which again focused on gay lives (or rather, given the changing times, LGBT lives), was framed as a modern counterpart to *Queer as Folk*, but failed to have the same impact.

That might also be down to the changing television landscape, and the decline of mainstream "event drama" in the age of streaming services. Davies wonders if he's the only person in the world watching HBO's *Here and Now*, by *Six Feet Under*'s Alan Ball. "There's 2,000 more dramas than when I was young," he says. "I'm beginning to wonder if I'm old-fashioned, because I haven't got a Netflix drama [commissioned]."

Despite the criticisms, there is something to be said for Davies's approach. His scripts fizz – during his time as *Doctor Who*'s head writer, it was fashionable to deride them as soapy and borderline cartoonish, in comparison to the clockwork elegance of Steven Moffat's "Blink", "The Girl in the Fireplace" and "Silence in the Library". But as soon as Moffat took over, fans began to pine for the accessibility and emotional range of the RTD era. This makes total sense to me: I might admire the cool prose of Martin Amis, but I reliably cry when Tiny Tim dies in *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. So, Dickens with more dicks: that's the promise of an RTD production.

The year is 1960, and Jeremy Thorpe is a rising star in parliament when he meets a young man with many names, the most memorable of which is Norman Scott. He will keep their five-year (illegal) sexual relationship a secret, until Scott's repeated attempts to go public become too much. In 1975, a hit man tries to kill Scott, and succeeds in fatally shooting his dog Rinka. At the subsequent trial for attempted murder, Thorpe is acquitted, but he loses his parliamentary seat and his glittering future.

Why tell this story now? Davies's answer is surprising. "I asked about it ten years ago, I sent out feelers, and everyone was waiting for Jeremy Thorpe to die, sadly, because he was found not guilty, we have to remember that... what a great story! Apart from anything else, I don't like dogs, so I was quite happy to write something in which the dog gets shot! I love that!"



Sheer energy: *Queer as Folk* broke new ground

Uh oh, I say. That will get you letters. He laughs again, all 6ft 6in of him rocking in his chair. "I know, finally the hate campaign reaches me!"

The challenge in adapting the book is not making it dramatic, but making it plausible. It is full of improbably named characters (take a bow, Edna Friendship) and the kind of postwar weirdness that reminds you the freewheeling vibes we associate with the Sixties were not evenly distributed. And of course, the dog, which Davies discovered was not the "little puppy, yapping away" he had imagined, but a Great Dane. "I'd always heard it as a story where the dog was shot

"I was young, on fire – I'm full of doubt now," he says of his early work

by mistake – and we'll never know exactly what happened on those moors – but of course you shoot the Great Dane first, it's a fucking enormous dog!"

A Very English Scandal also interweaves the story of the 1967 bill that decriminalised homosexuality, and the courage it took for MPs and peers to champion it. In 2013, the actor Rupert Everett reflected in the *New Statesman* on the changes in gay life he had experienced: "To give one an idea of the national attitude, one has only to listen to Roy Jenkins, the home secretary at the time, during the all-night debate which led up to the vote [on decriminalisation]. He declared that 'those who suffer from this disability carry a great weight of shame all their lives'. And he was on *our* side!"

The BBC's Piers Wenger, who commissioned the three-part Thorpe series, tells me over email: "It would be easy to hang the piece on #MeToo, as the story of an abuse

of power. And to some degree that is what the story is. But in Russell's dramatisation both men are victims and it's the moral climate in which the story takes place which is most questionable – homosexuality is being decriminalised but it is far from accepted."

Even now, Davies says, "living in the world as a gay man is a political act... the American elections roll around, you literally have genuine, honest Republican candidates sitting there talking about locking us up in camps".

The gains of the gay rights movement, of feminism, and of equalities legislation generally might be stellar, but they are fragile. Social conservatism mutates and finds new forms. "Before Theresa May got in, when we were looking at a government that could still rear its ugly head, of [Michael] Gove, of Jacob Rees-Mogg, of Boris Johnson: that's not gone," says Davies. "She'll go soon, and that's what we're left with, and that is a terrifying government."

He has thought a lot about how to make political points on television without turning the whole thing into a lecture. "It's bringing it into the kitchen," he says. And later: "Bring it back to the family every time." Family and friends mean a great deal to him: one of the reasons he has been, by his standards, less prolific in the last seven years is the time spent caring for his husband. Andrew was at his worst in 2012, when he developed an abscess after one of his brain operations. "He was running into walls, like a dog. Running. Bang, bang, beyond sense."

The couple married in Manchester town hall in 2012, in front of four guests, after Andrew was given only a 3 per cent chance of survival. Their relationship is characterised by the kind of affectionate teasing that only develops after decades. Moments after I arrive at the house, Davies stands at the kitchen worktop, urging Andrew to explain the plot of *Star Wars* to me, when he's never seen any of the films. "I think it's the funniest thing in the world," he says, and I can see he means it.

How will Russell T Davies be remembered? Here's a clue. The year is 2018. The latest Social Attitudes Survey finds that 64 per cent of Britons believe same-sex relationships are "not wrong at all". For that, we don't just have to thank the campaigners, and the legislators, but Stuart, Vince, Nathan, Captain Jack and, yes, maybe even that gay barman in *The Grand*. Russell T Davies was the man who brought politics into the kitchen, wrapped it in a laugh and a gasp, and made gay characters seem like family. | "A Very English Scandal" will be broadcast on BBC One later this month