

**IN MY VIEW**

Instead of harking back to a non-existent golden era, those who whinge about Saturday night TV should try watching it, suggests **Wayne Garvie**

**Saturday night's all right**

"The UK needs an alternative to what is currently on the BBC and ITV on Saturday nights. Currently there is nothing on TV that includes 'variety' as the British public perceives it to be." So says Richard Digance, managing director of The Great British Television Channel.

This channel launches on Christmas Eve, aiming to produce its own programmes and formats, backed by the likes of Joe Pasquale, Brian Conley, Chris Tarrant and Tommy Walsh. Digance says that the channel is a reaction to "crap" reality shows and says performers like him aren't on telly at the moment because there's "nothing on air that is good enough".

It would be easy to take Richard's words and mock his vanity – "Digance and Pasquale's Saturday Night Takeaway, if only I had thought of that!". Too easy, in fact, and possibly too cruel. Instead, let's take his central point, the whole basis on which his new venture appears to be based, that Saturday night telly is rubbish and offers no variety for the viewer.

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The "Saturday night telly is crap" argument is one of the hoariest clichés of our industry. It isn't exactly complicated: there was a golden era in the 1970s/1980s (when we were growing up/getting regular work) and since then (when we got older/the work dried up) it's been rubbish.

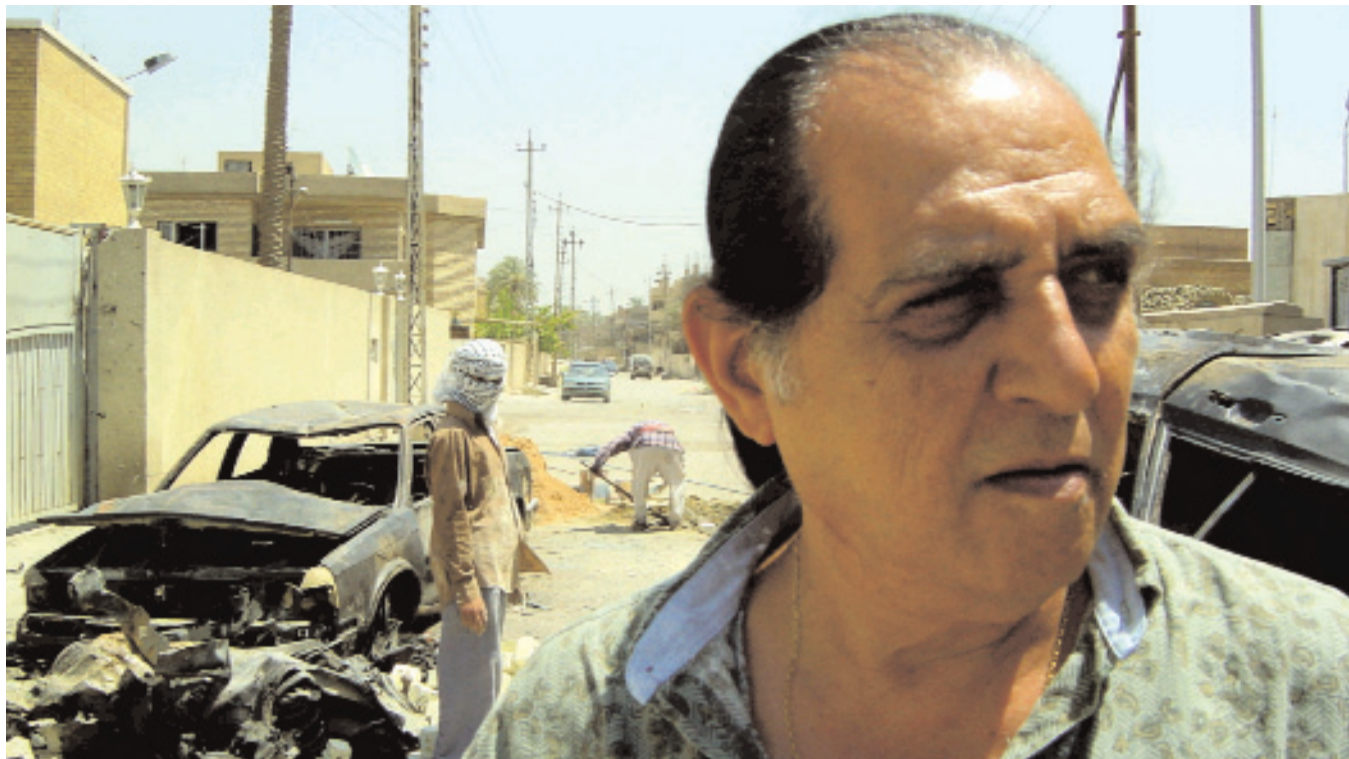
Some of the more sophisticated versions of this even appear to suggest that Cannon and Ball were the high-water mark for British popular culture. However, who in his right mind, with any grounding in the world we live in, could genuinely say that the Saturday night offerings on our two major channels this season are not providing variety and excellence to the audience?

It's my view that we are witnessing a renaissance in the quality of Saturday night television unparalleled for over a decade. Obviously I'm biased about the triumph of *Strictly Come Dancing*, with its blend of old-style glitz and modern day celebrity and audience involvement. It's a show that underlines the rebirth of BBC entertainment, which we have spent two years working towards.

But *Strictly* is only part of a wonderful autumn landscape that includes inventive shows and marvellous talent as diverse and compelling as *Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway*, Sharon Osbourne on *The X Factor*, the genius of Harry Hill, Ian Wright dabbling with punters and one-off treats on BBC1 with the likes of Rod Stewart and Barry Manilow. There has been a major investment by both channels in entertainment shows and that's been rewarded by great programmes and large audiences.

I wish Richard Digance and his merry crew the best of luck. But the fact is, a new generation has raised the bar significantly and Great British Television is going to have to be pretty bloody great to come close to equalling what we already have. Roll on Christmas Eve!

Wayne Garvie is head of the BBC entertainment group

**COMMENT****The price of a vocation**

Fresh from remortgaging his house in order to make a film about Iraq, Sean McAllister asks why passionate film-making is so undervalued and poorly rewarded in television



**SEAN MCALLISTER** is a documentary film-maker

WHEN I decided to take a career in television I was under the illusion that I might also make a living out of making films. For a few years I did just that. I've made five films in my short TV career. All of these films were given significant funding and have gone on to find considerable international audiences,

through festivals and foreign broadcasters. But recently, I have had to remortgage my house and worse still, spend the kids savings just to finish my latest film, *The Liberace of Baghdad*, which premieres at the Sheffield International Documentary Festival this Saturday. The experience leaves me wondering what it was that attracted me to television in the first place.

I left behind factory life 20 years ago in search of a career as a documentary film-maker. Television was my education and inspiration, so great was the British tradition in documentary film-making. My first taste of television was being given a mini-DV camera and sent to my hometown to find a story. My film was about an unemployed man who refused to work. He'd been on the dole for 18 years. I'd been on the dole after leaving the factory and could relate to him. I had great freedom making the film, but over the nine months of filming I was only paid for 10 shooting days (at £150 a day). As a result, I signed on to survive. One week I was in the job centre filming my character sign on and the next week I was there with him trying to hide my face. I'd just graduated from the National Film and Television School after six years of training in documentary film-making.

I was happy to have worked for some of television's best documentary strands. The BBC's *Modern Times* where I made the film *Minders*. It became the BBC's highest rating Iraq film, getting an audience of over 2.5 million at 9pm, with a healthy budget of £110,000. I worked for the great

Channel 4 series *True Stories* with budgets of £160,000 on international films. Both series have been axed as television moves to more entertainment-style programming leaving BBC's *Storyville* to stand alone. But *Storyville* only has small budgets and it needs film-makers to find co-finance. When I wanted to make another film in Iraq early this year it seemed the only viable option. It could only offer £50,000 but managed to raise £20,000 from TV2 in Denmark. I managed to find a way of delivering the film for £70,000 by only shooting for 12 weeks and deferring all my fees.

I'd wanted to return to Iraq for sometime since the fall of Saddam and felt the media coverage since the war had been appalling.

**'What makes a film different is a vision, a person behind the camera with an opinion'**

The only documentaries I'd seen were ones about American soldiers in combat or current affairs films like *Panorama*. I think documentaries can and should go further.

I've spent seven months on and off in Iraq filming this year. I didn't know what was going to happen in January when I began filming. I found an interesting character to follow the events through and had a commissioning editor, Nick Fraser, who supported me and trusted my judgment. I was interested in one central question that all the numerous news reports couldn't answer: "What was 'liberation' actually like for ordinary Iraqis?" I shot for twice as long as I was budgeted, as I was banged up in my hotel during the most dangerous bout of kidnappings in April when journalists were being pulled out. One friend is still missing. The pressures were bad enough filming in Iraq, but in these circumstances I found more use in a financial advisor than a producer. I

arranged a remortgage on my house to take the pressure off things at home in the 11 months of making my film.

I wasn't alone in Iraq though. Around me were other established film-makers such as Sean Langan who could not get commissioned as he was told that Iraq wasn't a story, the war had finished. Undeterred he took a bank loan to come out. At least I had the BBC flak jacket! I would lend it to him as he headed off into Fallujah each day. When Sean Langan's film *Mission Accomplished: Langan in Iraq* went on be a great success on BBC4, (which bought it in for peanuts) the BBC took the credit. But where was it when he really needed it? BBC2 offered him £15,000 to repeat his 90-minute film, an indication of the kind of risk-taking that is going on in British television.

I know many people who are content just making films, they don't have families and don't have to make a living. Television needs audiences and ratings are important. But too much TV today is commissioned from the top and handed down through the ranks. The vetting process takes the spark, the adventure, the excitement out of the programme however much it may guarantee the audience. I seldom see anything surprising on television. What makes a film different is a vision, a person behind the camera with an opinion, someone who cares about what they are doing. Not someone who makes competent films and gets paid for caring.

I will get paid if my film sells, but I'm not sure I can keep remortgaging my house. I became a film-maker because of great documentaries on television. TV is nothing without them. It is up to the film-makers to take risks and often not get paid but it should be the responsibility of the broadcasters to at least meet us half-way.

As the edit drew to a close my remortgage money was running out. I sought work in the pea factory I'd left many years ago to go into TV. Sadly, it had just closed down. *The Sheffield International Documentary Festival takes place from 8 to 14 November. (www.sidf.co.uk)*