

BlackLight Television—written evidence (FCF0012)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into the future of Channel 4

BlackLight Television, of which we are Joint Managing Directors, is a small independent drama producer that was founded in 2017 and has flourished with the unique support of Channel 4.

Every year we make a successful returning drama for the channel called On The Edge, which features three thematically linked films that tackle important subjects such as young people's experience of the criminal justice system or living with parents with mental health issues. However, what is most impressive about On The Edge isn't the critical acclaim the films achieve or the fact that they have been nominated and won numerous, prestigious awards (8 BAFTAs) – but the fact that they are entirely written and directed by new diverse talent via the Channel 4 4Stories initiative.

Every year 4Stories holds an open submission for any emerging writers and directors seeking their first broadcast credit. Thousands apply and we select the three most exciting writers and three most exciting directors to participate. The idea is to encourage original voices that are rarely seen on British television. First the writers work with experienced drama producers at BlackLight Television for 6 months penning three original dramas. Next, we select directors on the basis of their visions for the films. Like the writers the directors work with BlackLight drama producers, a professional production team, and an experienced television director who acts as mentor through the process, to help them realise the films. We endeavour to create a positive and enriching experience and a supportive environment that guides the talent but also allows it to flourish. The ambition is to kickstart careers and create dramas that stand shoulder to shoulder with any primetime show.

We truly believe that there is no other broadcaster – terrestrial or streamer – that would make this level of commitment to new diverse talent. 4Stories is completely unique in this regard and is increasingly important for the diversity and renewal of our television drama industry.

Key to the success of the initiative is Channel 4's support. It is true that there are other new talent and diversity training schemes, but they rarely make the impact, and are certainly criticised for failing to provide the launching pad, they claim to offer. 4Stories is different. Because we make fully funded dramas that are shown at primetime on the main channel, the new talent that work with us gain that crucial first credit that is so key to progressing in this industry.

This matters.

It matters because the make up of our industry is still under-representative of wider society and the 4Stories initiative is making a quantifiable difference.

It matters because we make original dramas that reach audiences that are still underserved by the mainstream. To see people and communities - with similar hopes and challenges - reflected back is important and enriching for us all. It helps us understand each other and helps us all to feel included.

But it also matters for the overall health and growth of the industry. The Arts have always relied on a symbiotic relationship between the mainstream and the independent sector. You saw it in the studio system in America which relied on a thriving independent film industry for renewal and rejuvenation. You see it now with the global streamers wanting to climb on board and co-produce Channel 4 shows. Mainstream culture will always rely on an independent sector for the freshest, most original ideas. You need breakthrough voices that speak of contemporary concerns that haven't yet reached the mainstream. Otherwise, the culture stagnates.

The idea that if Channel 4 were privatised then shows and initiatives like 4Stories could still exist is, in our opinion, naïve and not borne out by the evidence. Because no other broadcaster or streamer backs their new talent initiatives with the funding that Channel 4 backs 4Stories. And it is this funding that allows our new talent to be genuinely ambitious and properly showcase their vision.

This is because there is a tendency to be risk adverse on the big commercial channels. The 4Stories initiative doesn't produce a long-running series that can sell around the world or be re-formatted, it isn't made by a big-name writer who can bank viewers or sales, it isn't a show that is desperately chasing audience figures – much loved though it is whenever it is discovered. And it doesn't do those things precisely because there is no commercial imperative to 4Stories. The imperative is rather to give underrepresented voices the platform they need to launch their careers. Without this, and many of the other unique things that Channel 4 do, we would all be poorer.

To illustrate this point we'd like to tell you about one of the films we've made with entirely new talent for channel 4 called Ellen. It's written by Sarah Quintrell and directed by Mahalia Belo. Both Sarah and Mahalia had been knocking on industry doors for many years but to no avail. Mahalia had received a fantastic training from the NFTS, her graduate film being nominated at Sundance, but nevertheless, despite lots of interest, no one would give her that first opportunity. They both did a fantastic job on Ellen, it went on to win 2 BAFTAs (best breakthrough and best drama), the Broadcast Award for best single, the Writers Guild Award for best screenplay, and the Prix Italia for best drama. Since then, Sarah has gone on to write on His Dark Materials and The Power and Mahalia has directed Requiem, a six-part Netflix show, and the BBC's acclaimed drama, The Long Song. It's fair to say that without that first chance neither may have gone on to make their significant contributions.

When we came to write this argument we looked back at Channel's 4 remit as sited in in the 2003 Communications Act. The imperative is to "appeal to a culturally diverse society" and to make programmes that "exhibit distinctive character" and have an "educative value". Channel 4 are doing what they were founded to do. What could be more educative than a show that actually teaches those who make it how to have a successful career in television? It is not a show

with a financial value attached. It is a show with values attached. Channel 4's values.

Here's some other success stories from the 4Stories initiative:

Georgia Christou, now a lead writer on Netflix's *Chaos*, as well as many other projects, had only ever written a stage play when she joined the scheme. She said "To see something through to production early on in your writing life is in my opinion the most incredible opportunity to learn. Casting; visiting set; working with a director; meeting deadlines; incorporating a commissioner's notes; rewriting around budget or location restrictions...I couldn't have experienced this stuff writing on spec." Janice Okoh, again a playwright before 4Stories said "4Stories has helped raise my profile – I have had lots meetings with TV producers and I am now developing several TV shows. I am really glad I did it as I now have an original TV credit and I feel I have grown as a person from it." Rose Lewenstein said "4Stories was a baptism of fire in the best possible way. It was my first experience working in TV and a brilliant chance to gain experience in every aspect of the process – from the seed of the idea right the way through to production. Since 4Stories I haven't stopped working." Will Smith said "4Stories was a defining project for me as it helped demonstrate to producers that I was worthy of being hired for directing assignments. Immediately following *BBW*, I directed the season finale of Armando Iannucci's new HBO comedy *Avenue 5*. I was able to step into this role, and direct the likes of Hugh Laurie with confidence, thanks to my experiences on 4Stories." Ash Morris said "As someone coming from a disadvantaged background and having disabilities means I'm occasionally lacking in confidence. To have been selected to direct for Channel 4 is a real honour, a life changing opportunity and I want to keep pushing forward for change." Writer JC Servante said "4Stories was a career breakthrough. Through the comprehensive support of the 4Stories initiative, including preview events at both BAFTA Cymru and Channel 4 in London, both BlackLight and Channel 4 have helped me to grow my industry network and access new opportunities in TV and film. Thanks to 'For You', I have been awarded an original series development with Channel 4, completed a pilot, signed with an agent, and, now, secured a place in the BBC Studios Writer's Academy 2021. I have emerged from the process with an all-important first credit, a treasure trove of insight and a belief that more is possible."

We're sure you get the idea. By putting equal opportunities, new talent and diversity at the core of 4Stories, Channel 4 is changing people's lives and giving us stories that wouldn't otherwise be told. They have helped our company get a foothold in the industry and flourish. Would a commercial entity deliver to this extent? Get real, of course they wouldn't.

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