

# Interview with Russell T Davies

Russell T Davies was born and educated in Swansea before attending Worcester College, Oxford where he read English Literature, graduating in 1984. He worked in theatre before moving to the BBC first as floor manager and production assistant, later establishing himself, as a producer, and writer. His first television drama was a serial for children entitled 'Dark Season'. He then wrote 'Children's Ward' in 1992 while working for Granada. Since then he has built up an impressive writing record which includes contributions to highly acclaimed dramas such as 'Touching Evil', 'The Second Coming', 'Linda Green', 'New Street Law', and 'Queer as Folk' often working in collaboration with the independent film company Red.



As a childhood fan of 'Dr Who' he was prepared to take on a risky revival of the BBC programme. This has proved so successful it is now in its third series, and has generated the spin-off 'Torchwood'. Both are filmed in Cardiff. Russell is a hugely talented and influential character in his field.

## What was your family background?

I am the son of two teachers (Classics and French) and I lived in a house full of books. My father was genuinely learned, and I was brought up on stories of Greek mythology, Zeus, Hannibal's crossing of the Alps etc – all of which I loved. I also had a very good English teacher, Dr Harding, at my old school; Olchfa Comprehensive.

Essentially I was a swot and I loved reading. I had two older sisters who both became teachers. My parents were first generation university.

## Where does the creative impetus come from?

I am always thinking of stories and I belonged to the West Glamorgan Youth Theatre which provided me with an introduction into acting and writing. It was well-funded and always put on classic plays. I remember, as a fifteen year old, that we were invited to write a play. I wrote a short play, and then another the following year, both of which were performed to a paying public. I always loved it. I don't know where the ideas come from – they come naturally from the way I think and work.

## Can you explain how you became involved with writing and producing the new Dr Who?

I have always loved Dr Who. At the time I was writing for Channel 4 and based in Manchester. By virtue of numerous

conversations on the subject of Dr Who my name had become automatically connected with the programme. The programme being based in Cardiff was the result of a series of coincidences and relationships. I had already worked with Julie Gardner (Head of Drama, BBC Wales) on 'Casanova' (also with David Tennant) so we knew each other. At the same time as she was asked to become Head of Drama, the BBC asked her to do Dr Who with me. The Cardiff location is down to Julie being here. Meanwhile, I would not have wanted to go to London where the prices are much higher and red tape is that much greater. However, I was quite wary about working 'in-house' having been independent so it was important for me for work for the right person. It has turned out brilliantly.

## So is there an element of a Welsh Campaign here?

Actually, I feel very passionately that there are not enough Welsh voices on the television. There are so many Irish and Scottish voices – I believe we need to normalise the Welsh voice on television.

## How much feedback have you had with regard to the benefits of using Cardiff as a location?

Mostly audiences don't really register locations; they are more interested in story-lines. But for the industry, the effects are positive, and there are many

benefits for Cardiff. You only have to ask taxi drivers, newsagents, pubs, shops and hotels; all benefiting from the people working on the programme spending their money, and also visitors to the sets. Also crowds of families enjoy watching the filming. The programme uses local sound and camera crews, multi-media support services, post-production, dubbing and editing. I had my doubts about this at first, having worked at Granada where there is a BAFTA winning craftsman in every corner of the building. What would the dubbing be like in Wales, what about post-production – how good would it be? I had genuine doubts. But they are brilliant. It turns out that just because you haven't seen their work, it doesn't mean that they haven't got the skills. It just means they haven't had the exposure. The professionalism and gloss of Dr Who has been achieved by people working in Wales. Some of these people may come from outside Wales, but so what, it is still a Welsh production.

We also have a colossal facility with 5 working studios in Upper Boat in Treforest, where we do all the special effects. It comprises a number of old warehouses and during filming there are probably 200 people up there, with a sizeable permanent staff.

## Have there been any disadvantages or problems with making Dr Who in Wales?

Inevitably there has been some backlash. There are always elements in the metropolitan tabloid press who laugh at Cardiff. The papers can sometimes be quite patronising. However, newspaper sales are declining alarmingly because they are out-of-date when compared to the 50+ television channels, the internet, and a million other faster ways of communicating. For example, a Cardiff fifteen year old these days can communicate simultaneously with friends in Iceland and say Guatemala via [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com).

The benefits of producing Dr Who in Wales are perhaps underestimated when the view that it is 'a London programme hosted in Wales' is expressed.

## Having come from Granada in Manchester to the BBC in Cardiff, how do the broadcast milieu compare?

There are marked differences. Manchester has a forty year history of Coronation Street which has had a genuinely marked effect on the culture of the city. Actors and writers are secure in this and help is forthcoming there.

Cardiff is a much smaller community and in that sense it is more closed and perhaps more hostile. There are people who have worked here all their lives, and have dreamed of a major network success. The dream has come true, but not for them. It looks like I have just swanned in from outside, despite having been raised in Swansea. I do feel sorry for those who have wished for similar success and are not part of this.

**Is there a role for Public Sector support?**

Not as such. The TV licence fee pays for the BBC already, and anyway you can't expect the public sector to turn things round or influence the activities of broadcast and media. But, there could always be more enlightenment, especially on the part of our politicians. Having said that Cardiff Council are brilliant. They close off roads for us etc. Also we were able to film in the Sennedd, which was brilliant, and Andrew Davies opened the Upper Boat facility. I am also aware that there is support for spin-off production

companies from government agencies like Creative Business Wales. I think this reflects the importance of the creative industries to the Welsh Economy.

**How could young people get into the sector, and what qualifications are relevant?**

I do not want to knock media degrees, but they do seem to be quite commonplace these days. When I started at the BBC when I was 22 and I had been to Oxford, no-one ever asked me what my qualifications were. They don't relate to what happens in the workplace. I would never advise anyone to skip their education, but in the end three things count, talent, luck and hard work, with hard work being the most important.

Also, when I started there were only 3 channels. Now, there are over fifty. This means more opportunity. I can give you an example. 'Dr Who Confidential' on BBC Three uses young directors, writers, editors and so on. These young people are cutting their teeth on

material that is being broadcast to over a million viewers every week, and the quality is phenomenal. The BBC's design department currently has 12 trainees. This is a brilliant initiative for which total credit should be given to the Head of Design here at the BBC.

**Who is your favourite Dr Who?**

Of course I would say David Tennant and Chris Eccleston. But my favourite from the old days is Tom Baker.

**Could you name two things about Wales you would like to change and two things you wish would never change?**

I am very proud of being Welsh but I would wish for less small town thinking, and there is a Welsh trait of expecting to fail - I would want to get rid of these characteristics.

But things I would never wish to change - the Welsh sense of humour is absolutely brilliant, and the Gower.....

**Russell T Davies, thank you**