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Section

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The soap that washed up

A special report on the wreckage of Eldorado



Adios Eldorado

On a summer's afternoon in a suburban Denver street back in 1974, Linda Miller swerved her car — containing herself, her shopping and her 19-month-old baby — on to the wrong side of the road, slammed her foot down hard and accelerated straight at an oncoming truck.

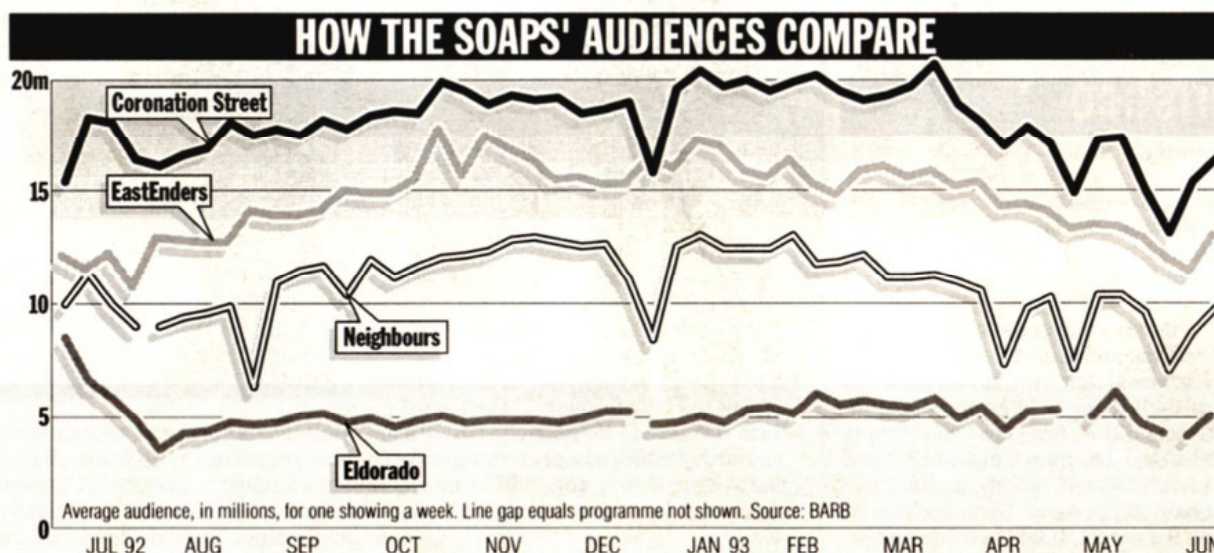
The truck contained two burglars and Mrs Miller's furniture, including her TV, which she had seen them taking as she returned home. As she barrelled towards it, the truck swerved on to the sidewalk and crashed. Mrs Miller screeched to a halt, ran out and started berating the men. The screaming turned into a discussion, and a compromise emerged. They gave her back her TV and she gave up the chase. Asked later by a reporter why she had risked her life and that of her baby, she replied: "I was mad. Anyone who deprives a woman of her soap operas is asking for trouble."

Nearly 20 years later and several thousand miles away, Alan Yentob's first significant decision as controller of BBC1 was to deprive millions of viewers of one of their soap operas: *Eldorado*. News of the cancellation inspired more public support for the soap than it had ever enjoyed in its brief run: petitions were signed; a demonstration was held outside the BBC; readers of the TV Times voted 9-1 in favour of the soap continuing; critics who had ridiculed *Eldorado*'s early episodes began to admit a sneaking admiration for recent storylines. Yentob himself says, "*Eldorado* is absolutely not a show which deserves to be badly remembered."

Eldorado was simply not that bad. The decision to cancel it was as puzzling as was the appallingly amateurish state in which the programme was first launched.

Indeed, the events surrounding the launch and then the cancellation of *Eldorado* would make a better soap opera than what actually appeared on screen. But where *Eldorado* was launched by the BBC as a story of "sun, sea, sangria... and, of course, sex", the political manoeuvrings behind the scene comprise a tale of "disasters, departures, disinformation... and,

This week, the BBC washes its hands of its failed soap opera. But just how bad, how expensive and how disastrous was it? MARK EDWARDS reports



of course, director-generals."

Nobody would deny that *Eldorado* began badly — "tunnelling its way back to the standards of *Crossroads*," as one critic put it; nor would anyone deny that it had improved greatly. Unfortunately, with the BBC's charter renewal looming, with a House of Commons national heritage committee investigation into the corporation's future (and another government inquiry into the effectiveness of its efficiency drive) already under way, and with a resulting white paper on the BBC due early next year, *Eldorado* had become more than just a programme. It had become a symbol of the kind of programming the BBC's new bosses thought it should not produce and the way it should not spend the revenues derived from the licence fee.

This transition from innovative programme to embarrassing problem began before *Eldorado* had even appeared on screen. Back in May 1992, the then heritage secretary

(and soon-to-be star of his own real-life soap opera), David Mellor, asked on *Frost On Sunday*, "Was it necessary to build with the licence fee a £10m village in Spain? The fact that you believe in the BBC does not mean you have to accept a great pantechon of bureaucracy rolling behind the programmes everyone watches."

Mellor's comment typifies one of *Eldorado*'s biggest problems: a skewed public image. The village did not cost £10m to build; that figure represents the entire annual budget for the show. But if his figures were wrong, the sentiment was clear. Later in the year, when the director-general, John Birt, was reported in *The Sunday Times* as telling friends that he didn't like the programme either, it became impossible (as is usual in such situations) to find a single BBC executive who would say anything supportive of the show. As John Dark, the man who actually came up with the idea

for *Eldorado* in the first place, says, "It was no longer seen as a piece of entertainment so much as a political hot potato."

If, after Birt's comments, it was unwise for anyone in the BBC to say anything nice about *Eldorado*, it was also not a great career move to have been in any way associated with it. There hasn't exactly been a purge of the drama department; but it seems unlikely that if the BBC were to launch another programme of such significance, any of the three men responsible for choosing *Eldorado* would be involved in the decision.

Two weeks ago Peter Cregeen stepped down as Head of Drama Series, to return to producing. He is still on contract with the BBC, but is currently "working at home" and "not really available" for comment. Mark Shivas, who had been head of the drama group since 1988, also stepped down to concentrate on developing BBC films. His place was taken by Charles Denton — the

man who, as programme controller of ATV (which then had the Midlands franchise), oversaw the firing of Noele Gordon from *Crossroads* back in 1981. Former BBC1 controller Jonathan Powell left at the end of December, 1992, to become head of drama at Carlton.

It was Powell, Shivas and Cregeen who, in November 1991, had weighed up the merits of three shortlisted soaps and chosen one called *Little England* — a tale of British expats living in Spain — as the early evening replacement for the ailing *Wogan*.

Little England began life as a tale of the upper-class expats based in Marbella — the brainchild of John Dark, a movie producer whose past work ranged from *Casino Royale* to Shirley Valentine. Dark's company, JD and T, worked on the outlines in conjunction with Cinema Verity, the production company headed by Verity Lambert, whose own impressive track record includes *Minder*, *Rumpole Of The Bailey* and *Dr Who*.

The BBC bought the idea, but wanted to change it. "What happened," says Dark, "is that the BBC — in the shape of Jonathan Powell — wanted Julia Smith to produce it and Tony Holland to supervise the writing of it. They were given a free hand. I was told that the British, unlike the Americans, like their soaps to be working class. As I don't have a TV background, I bowed reluctantly to what I was being told."

With Smith and Holland — the team behind *EastEnders* — presiding, the imminent arrival of *Little England* was announced. It would be "the biggest and boldest idea anyone has attempted in the history of television," said Powell, setting what was to become a trend among *Eldorado*'s creators for hubristic statements.

Having changed the name to *Eldorado* — Shivas pointed out that *Little England* wouldn't play too well in Wales, Scotland and Ulster — production began in January for what was to be a September launch.

But in the spring, Powell suddenly announced that *Eldorado* would launch in July. There were

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murmurings of discontent out in Spain (although Powell says the principal figures always knew that July was the launch date; September was a piece of disinformation aimed at ITV), but Smith was talking a good fight. "Of course, I'm bracing myself for a rough ride," she said. "But all credit to Jonathan Powell and the BBC, who have been brave enough to trust us to fulfil this crazy dream." (That is probably not exactly how it was presented in internal BBC documents.) "If it succeeds," said Smith, "it will do so because it has not been watered down by committee after committee. And if it flops, it flops because we got it wrong. There will be no blame on the BBC."

Fine, noble words, but hopelessly untrue: if Eldorado failed, there would be a lot of blame floating around the BBC. Because — even before it became a "political hot potato" — Eldorado represented the BBC's most important scheduling move since the arrival of EastEnders seven years earlier.

The BBC's problem was replacing

Head honchos

Verity Lambert, executive producer: her post-Eldorado career kicked off with the disappointing Channel 4 drama *Comics*; is currently producing new series of her sitcoms *May To December* and *So Haunt Me* for the BBC.

Julia Smith, original producer: for health reasons, she has not worked since Eldorado.

Tony Holland, creator and storyliner: his post-Eldorado achievement has been the creation and storylining of a detective series for Swedish television.

John Dark, executive producer: has been in Hollywood trying to arrange co-production deals with His-

panic and South American cable TV channels; has also been attempting to encourage American TV executives to film in Spain.

Jonathan Powell, controller of BBC1: joined Carlton TV as director of Drama in December.

Mark Shivas, head of BBC Drama: moved in April to head of BBC Films, once a small part of his previous drama empire.

Peter Cregeen, head of BBC Drama Series: resigned on June 14, but is still on contract to the BBC.

Mervyn Watson, line producer: currently the acting head of BBC Drama Series.

Wogan — 156 half-hours of extremely cheap (£25,000 a show) television programming at 7pm three nights a week. After seven years in the same slot, Wogan was a sitting duck for ITV's schedulers; they'd kept trying out new shows against it, until they'd found what worked. As a result, Wogan's rating had steadily dropped.

The Monday-Wednesday-Friday 7pm slot is one of two key times for

BBC1 (the other being 8pm); it has to maximise its audience before Coronation Street, when a proportion of viewers will switch over, and then maximise the audience again at 8pm, to bolster itself against the audience drop-away when the Nine O'Clock News comes on. While ITV has the chance to build an audience steadily across most of the evening, BBC1 stops and starts. But the bigger the audience going into the 7.30 and 9pm slots, the bigger the audience that will stay with the channel; so it has to attack at 7pm and 8pm. Eldorado's task was to get a big audience, both for its own sake, and also to maximise the number of viewers who stayed with the BBC when Coronation Street came on. If it failed, BBC1's whole evening could fail.

Eldorado launched on July 6 last year, following two weeks of heavily rotated trailers. Critical assessments were mixed. "Like a sugary pink chunk of Spanish seaside rock," said Today, "Eldorado has success written all the way through." The Guardian's Nancy Banks-Smith was stunned: "Eldorado goes straight for the young, drunk vote with a directness that leaves you winded," she wrote.

Viewers' reactions were a lot clearer. The first episode began with an audience of 7.3m. Within minutes it had dropped to 6.5m, while ITV's competing *Take Your Pick* grew its starting audience of 7.8m to 9.4m.

The figures got worse. Much worse. Six weeks after its launch, it bottomed out one Friday at 2.8m. On the same day, Julia Smith went on "extended leave", and actress Kathy Pitkin was told that her character, Fizz, had been dropped.

By the autumn, Eldorado had literally become a joke. Nouvelle recycled toilet tissue was advertised with the headline "In my previous life I was an Eldorado script", a haemorrhoid ointment claimed "this makes even sitting through an episode of Eldorado tolerable", and the residents of Eldorado Close, in the Warwickshire village of Studley, asked the council if they could change the name of their street because people were laughing at them.

Starting from this low base, Smith's replacement, Corinne



Hollingworth, began to turn the programme round. With fewer characters and stronger storylines, audiences began to get involved in Eldorado, and ratings started slowly to grow. An episode involving the suicide of one character, Javier, managed to get 8m viewers.

But the improvement in the quality of the programme and the slight

improvement in audience figures wasn't enough to save it. On March 12 this year, Yentob opted not to renew the programme for another year, leaving it to play out for the rest of its initial contract period — until July 9. "The whole team... have put great effort into refreshing the programme in recent weeks," he said. "But it has still not engaged the affection and

Menu turístico

TO ADMIT to liking Eldorado is to court ridicule, to risk becoming a social pariah. Despite this, the show still has its devoted fans. Pleased by the soap's positive approach to its gay characters, a pressure group of Scottish homosexuals — dubbing itself SENG (Save Eldorado Now Grade, Alright?) — was set up to lobby Channel 4 boss Michael Grade to buy the doomed show and resurrect it as a cult programme along the lines of *Prisoner Cell Block H*. The Save Eldorado campaign initiated by the west London bus driver, Yzen Eng, and a marketing consultant, Barry Thomson, has a network of eight regional co-ordinators stretching from Glasgow to Plymouth to orchestrate the guerrilla tactics of its database of 1,000 committed fans.

If a holiday in Spain this summer they are in for a special treat: they can take a guided tour around the Eldorado set. Covering an area of 100,000 square metres, the studios of what is now Coin Film City comprise the largest permanent film and television set in Europe. The independent Spanish television company, Antenna 3, recently shot a variety show called *Burbujas* (Bubbles) on the site. But after a trial, free-of-charge Eldorado Weekend in May attracted 1,600 tourists to the village, it was decided to open the sets to the public. Last Monday, 150 visitors paid for the pleasure.

The basic two-hour tour costs 1,500 pesetas (£8). For another 1,500 pesetas, visitors are allowed to eat in the "Restaurant of the Stars" — what used to be the

BBC's on-site staff canteen. The tour starts with a visit to the cast's dressing rooms. They are exactly as they were left on the last day of filming with make-up and brushes scattered on every surface.

Fans are then allowed into the Lockhead family's villa. Only six of the village's 36 houses have interiors; the rest are just empty shells. In one episode Drew Lockhead fell asleep in his armchair, dropping a lighted cigarette on the carpet. It set his home on fire, so visitors are offered an explanation of the special pyrotechnic effects necessary to create this scene. It is all done with gas cylinders, apparently. Everybody can sit in Drew's armchair.

Next on the itinerary is Trish Valentine's love nest, where she spent hours in the arms of sulky toyboy Dieter. Then it's off to the shopping complex and a visit to Joy's bar. After a stop in the Eldorado police station — unruly kids are briefly locked in one of the cells, ha ha — the tour reaches its apogee: Marcus Tandy's bedroom. There are nude Degas reproductions on the walls, and everyone is allowed to lounge on his sexy red-and-black duvet.

Then it's time to buy T-shirts. There are no "My parents went to Eldorado and all they got me was this lousy T-shirt"-style garments. "We're trying to keep it as upmarket as possible," says John Dark, Eldorado's executive producer. The T-shirts don't even have the BBC's official Eldorado logo, due to "contractual problems".

Hasta

THE CASUALTIES:

Kathy Pitkin, child bride Fizz: last episode, September 14, 1992. How disposed of: ran away from marital home; body washed up on Brighton beach; presumed suicide. Subsequent employment: one month's work in *Sleeping Beauty* panto in Leeds. Is thinking of applying for drama school.

Roger Walker, Bunny, porky husband of Fizz: last episode, March 5, 1993. How disposed of: depressed after disappearance of young wife, goes on world cruise. Subsequent employment: appears as a policeman in episode of *Over The Rainbow*, new Brighton-based ITV sitcom; has done a management training film for Ford cars.

Jon Morrey, Allan Hindle: last episode, December 21, 1992. How disposed of: brother became a

schizophrenic; mother to Subsequent employment: ("The show was doomed")

Kai Maurer, toyboy Dieter: last episode, September 9, 1992. How disposed of: windsurfing season. Subsequent employment: £3.25-an-hour waiter in

Iker Ibanez, Javier Fernandez: last episode, February 12, 1993. How disposed of: wedding day by carbon monoxide poisoning. Subsequent employment: in

Patch Connolly, handyman: last episode, February 24, 1993. How disposed of: to look after sick mother. Subsequent employment: four-week run in



attention of viewers to the level to warrant investing in a further year's production."

So why — despite its improvement — couldn't the BBC stick with it any longer? Although not the best thing on television, it was not noticeably worse than many other soaps that survive and prosper on screen, such as *Home And Away* and *Take The High*

Road. "Some of the episodes we did were better than anything I ever did on *EastEnders*," says Hollingworth, citing the meeting of gay Freddie with his grown-up daughter, and the death of Javier. "If we'd been given another contract, the audience would have come round to it. Certainly within the next few months we could have got up to 10m."

A Spaniard in the works: on the set of Eldorado
Photographs by Paul Massey

David Docherty, the head of strategy and planning at the BBC, disputes the figures. Hollingworth had managed to get up to 8m on occasion, if you included the repeat audience. Docherty says *Eldorado's* task was to get 10m on its first showing alone. "It was designed to get 40% of the audience on its evening showing and if you look at the share it was getting, the graph is almost flat; there's very little sign of growth." Indeed, the episode transmitted on Friday, June 25 managed to get only 3.5m viewers, a 21% share of the available audience.

Hollingworth says, "It takes a long time to change a brand image; if the BBC had been able to commit to the programme it would have grown. But I don't think the BBC works like that any more. It won't commit itself to something and support it through the bad times. It used to do that. Now it doesn't."

The BBC's lack of commitment is startling. Long before the cancellation, the corporation seemed to have given up on the show. Nobody

Last of the big pesetas

AFTER the shambles of the first episode, it seemed inconceivable that the BBC should have wasted £10m of licence-payers' money on *Eldorado*. However, considering that the corporation reckons to spend an average of £500,000 for an hour of original drama, and that the £10m was buying 156 half-hour episodes of the soap, the figure suddenly seems a lot more reasonable.

"If you want to look at *Eldorado* as solely a value-for-money project for payers of the BBC's licence fee, then £64,000 per episode is actually very good value indeed," argues Alan Ayres, a BBC spokesman. The exact financial breakdown of the £10m remains one of the BBC's best-kept secrets, but the construction of the purpose-built *Eldorado* village is known to have cost around £2m. The other £8m purchased props, costumes (scanty), cameras, lighting, sound equip-



ment; all the paraphernalia of filming. It also paid for the hundreds of technical staff and the actors — "the lion's share", according to Ayres.

The BBC has managed to recoup some of its £10m. Although

Eldorado sold poorly in foreign markets, such sales still amounted to "substantial amounts" according to BBC Enterprises. All the technical equipment used by the film crew, and the village set, has been leased for a year to *Eldorado's* Spanish co-producers, JD&T, in an attempt to generate income.

The end of the soap is being commemorated with the *Adios Eldorado* video, priced at £10.99. The *Neighbours* tape of the wedding of Kylie and Jason sold 100,000 copies, so it is not inconceivable that the *Adios Eldorado* tape could eventually recoup a tenth of the price of the whole *Eldorado* production.

seemed interested in denying rumours of its cancellation, which began at the turn of the year. Why should the BBC expect viewers to get involved in a soap opera when it could end any day? As Hollingworth puts it, "They weren't given permission to view."

This negative attitude derives from the BBC's mixed corporate feelings about such programmes as *Eldorado*. "You always run into problems at the BBC when you do programmes with a high entertainment content," says Powell. "We had the same problems with *EastEnders* in the early days — 'Do we have to do this kind of programme?'. There has always been a moral dilemma at the heart of the BBC about those kind of shows."

As another former BBC executive says, "The problem is, why is Noel's House Party acceptable to the BBC? Because it's a bloody enormous success, that's why. The trouble with trying to define a BBC strategy from all this is you can't. If all the discussion about the Charter had been going on a few years back, when Noel Edmonds's ratings weren't as high, he could easily have become the symbol of that kind of entertainment-based programming, and then he'd have been the one to be dropped."

In fact, the BBC's fears over its Charter have had more effect on their primetime schedules than simply making them waste a year in sorting out the 7pm slot (which is the net result of the £10m spent on *Eldorado*). Powell had originally wanted to pull *Casualty* into the 8pm slot as a twice-a-week serial. The chances are it would have been enormous; but, insiders say, the higher levels of the BBC wouldn't countenance a programme showing up the deficiencies of the NHS in such a high-profile slot, just when it needed to get in with the government.

Another former BBC1 controller,

Bill Cotton, now chairman of Noel Gay TV, thinks they're wrong to try: "There is no 'problem' with the licence fee. The problem is entirely in the minds of politicians, and the more time you spend discussing strategies of why you should keep the licence fee, the more you encourage those politicians to think of reasons why you shouldn't... If you make good programmes and involve the audience, the politicians aren't touch you. Unfortunately, they now believe that journalism is their core activity. I disagree; entertainment is their core activity. No one has affection for journalistic programmes."

John Dark, the man who started the whole *Eldorado* story rolling, narrows the focus back down: "If Jonathan Powell had stayed there, the programme would have been renewed. When a new broom comes in, they start brushing things away. And it's so much easier for Yentob to say no, because now we'll never know what would have happened if he'd stuck with it."

But we will know what happens to Yentob's replacements for *Eldorado*. If he plans to try another big soap, then he's keeping quiet about that for the moment. To begin with, the 7pm slot will be filled with a documentary on Mondays, Every Second Counts on Wednesdays and repeats of *Dad's Army* on Fridays, while Yentob looks for the elusive show that Powell started looking for back in 1990. Exactly what kind of programme is it? "No one can ever tell you," says Powell. "You don't know until you've got it. But you bloody well know when you haven't got it." □

The last episode of Eldorado will be screened on Friday, July 9 on BBC1 at 7pm
Boxed reports by Robert Leedham

la vista

took them back to England. ment: tabloid rent-a-quote ned but the sex was great").

Dieter: last episode, Decem- posed of: left after end of subsequent employment: is a in Mayfair, London.

ernandez: last episode, Feb- isposed of: killed in bath on a monoxide poisoning. Sub- in repertory in Madrid.

yman Snowy: last episode, w disposed of: rushes home other. Subsequent employ- n The Cherry Orchard.

THE SURVIVORS:

Julie Fernandez, wheelchair-bound *Vanessa Lockhead*: last seen signing on at JobCentre in Ilford, Essex ("Dole-dorado!").

Patricia Brake, *Gwen Lockhead*: has done voice-overs for radio and TV commercials. Is soon to star in a new comedy play.

Polly Perkins, *Trish Valentine*: publication of her autobiography, *The Rocky Road To Eldorado*, has been cancelled. Is booked to appear in panto with Cannon and Ball in Sheffield.

Jesse Birdsall, *Marcus Tandy*: had a cameo in Channel 4's *Sean's Show*, appeared on *The Big Breakfast*, and has a small part in a new British film, *Bedlam*.