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THE LAST DAYS OF EL DORADO



Russell Davies reports from the wreckage

It started with high hopes, a saga of sun, sex and sangria. It concludes on Friday, drowned in a sea of ridicule. **Russell Davies** reports from Spain on

the last days of



Eldorado

Photographs by Christopher Pillitz



Eldorado cast members Bill Lucas and Hilary Crane bid each other an emotional farewell on set at the end of the final week of filming. *Far left, the last take*



THE WORD has gone out that all company cars are to be returned by Friday as supplied, clean and with a full tank. The tables and chairs and parasols on the canteen roof terrace were there yesterday, gone today. Suntanned figures pad along the paths of the compound, burdened with cardboard boxes and bulging carrier bags. As they pass the big yellow Spanish pillar-box, the one with the stuck-on sign reading 'Script Bin. Do Not Post Letters. They will be Shredded. Thank You', do they notice that the sign has gone, too? Sadly, there will be no more scripts to bin, for these are the Last Days of Eldorado, a co-production by Bad Luck, Bad Judgment and Knock the BBC Incorporated.

The series – 'the soap that didn't wash', according to *Lookout*, 'Spain's magazine in English' – has lasted 156 episodes; three a week for a year. Two numbers got lost on the way: episodes 32 and 33 were considered so ropey that they had to be amalgamated, and number 126 or so was shoved aside by Comic Relief Day. So the very last instalment carries the designation 158. Campbell Morrison, playing the likeable Scottish boozier, Drew Lockhead, reckons he has been in 150 of them. 'That's 75 hours of television!' he reminds himself, while signing a few late fan photos in the canteen. Morrison isn't sure which to be more astonished by, this total of work, or the way it has been massed from day to day. 'Patty Brake and I did 15

scenes yesterday. They wanted us to do 17.'

'They were all emotional family scenes, too. It's an acting factory,' says Patricia Brake, who has been playing Gwen Lockhead, the patient wife. 'I know an awful lot of actors who couldn't have coped with it.' She sits in her dressing-room in the actors' quadrangle, looking out through the open door at a straggly square of green. 'It's rather sad to see this; there's always been a little gardener in a hat, mowing the grass. This has only happened in the last couple of weeks.' The long grasses nod and droop, the actress sighs. 'I wouldn't have missed it for anything, it's been the most extraordinary year.'

Letters are still coming into the publicity cabin, and no doubt still will when there's nobody left to answer them. Replies are sent as diligently as ever, along with press releases outlining new developments in episodes about to be screened. We must draw a veil over the authorship of a spoof synopsis, destined for limited on-site circulation, which gives as the climax of the story the demise of 'shady Al Botney', the ultimate Mr Big, who ends up face down in a bowl of nourishing paella.

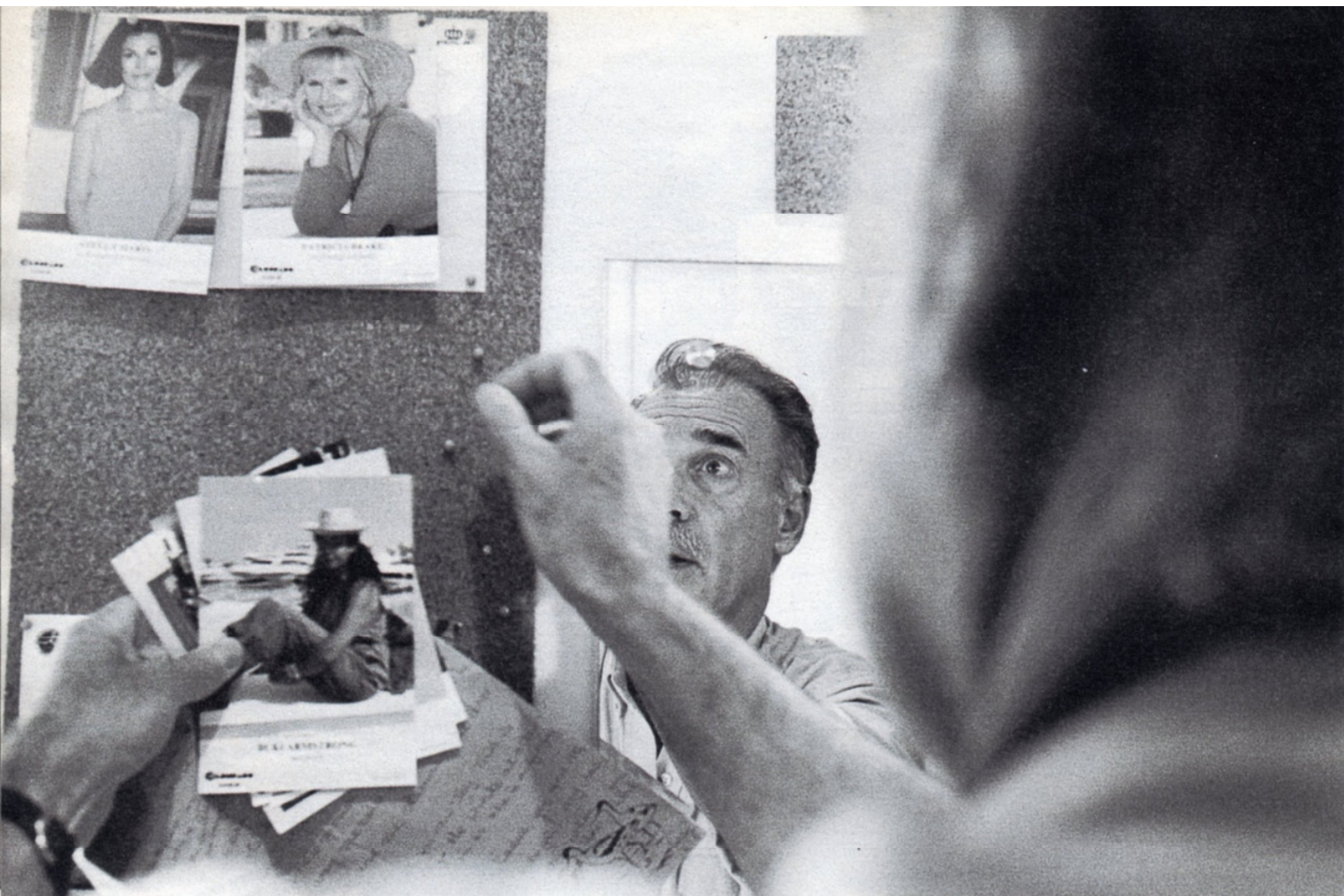
The name of Alan Yentob, whether in correct or satirically inverted form, is regularly taken in vain around these parts, for all that everyone is

careful to say that they understand *why* the new BBC1 Controller, from his deskbound viewpoint, felt he had to pull the plug on the series. Also they see that Yentob, coming to his new job from BBC2 and needing to establish his own pattern of evening scheduling, had 'no personal stake or investment' in the success of Eldorado. But having demonstrated their awareness of the internal *Realpolitik* of Television Centre, they tend to follow it up with a torrent of less reportable stuff. Some feel that Yentob, new in the job, was leaned on by the Director-General. 'It's no secret,' says series producer Corinne Hollingworth, 'that John Birt always disliked it. But whether his views carried any weight, I don't know.'

What everyone regrets, some in forceful terms, is that Yentob's fateful meetings with Eldorado's makers took place in London, and not on the specially-built estate, high in the hills behind Fuengirola and Marbella, where the team has been turning out the screen-time equivalent of a feature film every week. Yentob did offer to come out *after* cancelling the project, to explain himself, but was advised against it by everyone from Verity Lambert (of production partners Cinema Verity) downwards. The paella might have indeed hit the Controller if he had shown up, but he never did. 'Never. Never. Never!' confirms Faith Kent, amid the clatter of the canteen. 'He never saw the effort that was being put into getting it right.' Costumed in cardy and pearls from her role as the white-haired busybody Olive King, Miss Kent keeps

Faith Kent, above, who plays busybody Olive King, packs her belongings as her pet dog, Benny, looks on. Right, a stray 'For Sale' sign makes its own ironic comment as the final poolside scene is shot





'In every soap there are certain actors who are not very good'

Roland Curram removes photographs from his dressing-room wall, above. For him, *Eldorado* is 'the most interesting job I've ever done in my life'.

Right, Bo Corre signs a few final pictures for fans

up that noble tradition (established long ago by Margot Bryant, alias Minnie Caldwell, of *Coronation Street*) whereby the most demure character in any cast is in real life the most saltily outspoken. 'Whoever's up on the screen gets the shit,' she adds, sipping her tea.

The BBC has flown in, during these last days, to feed off the corpse of its own victim. A news crew has come down from Paris to film a two-minute capsule obituary for the Friday night bulletins. Reporter/producer Kirsty Lang has never seen *Eldorado*, but makes the best of it. At one point, there are actually three crews at work around the swimming-pool area of the set, two trying to patch together drama sequences, and one trying to film them at it.

Miss Lang's crew nips in and out of situations, as newsmen do; shooting opportunistically and bringing on a loud tantrum from the First Assistant on one of the *Eldorado* units. Their *Eldorado* report will duly appear as the closing item in the Six o'clock News for Friday, the last day of shooting. Its own best shot will come when the Spanish actor Franco Rey, the most impassioned of the ragers against the dying of the light, turns to camera and, apparently in tears, says brokenly, 'Oh, Mr Yentob - you are a cruel man.' Peter Sissons, the newsreader, will come back into vision wiping a crocodile tear from his own eye, which is naughty, at best, and at worst, a bit smug.

Such treatment was no more or less than the company had come to expect. The show grew up in an atmosphere of persecution and ridicule.

Media interests who routinely bash the Beeb anyway, often in the furtherance of their own invasions of the airwaves, greeted the enterprise with mock-shock, doing their best to suggest that the corporation had poured most of its annual budget into the Spanish stockade. Every laboured variation on the 'El Desastro, El BOREado, EldoraDODO' joke was cranked up and lobbed at the programme makers in the early days and, though they would have rather been more elegantly lampooned, they do all admit they deserved it at first. The pre-launch hype was not only excessive in scale but disingenuous in content: 'Sun, sex, and sangria - but everybody knows that at seven o'clock on British television, you can't even say bloody,' protests Franco Rey, who has been

based in England for more than 20 years.

In the early days, none of the arriving cast could fail to be impressed when they were spirited through Malaga airport a secret way, ushered into waiting cars bearing their names, and told at the gee-up meeting: 'Some of you have more experience than others, some are total unknowns. But from tomorrow, you are STARS!' But awful errors had already been made. Julia Smith, the original producer, with her *East-Enders* triumph behind her and the presence of her old storytelling collaborator Tony Holland seeming to guarantee a repeat success, inspired a mood of over-confidence. This time, Ms Smith appeared to have gone out of her way to display her talent as a starmaker, casting herself as Fairy Godmother to a bunch of Cinderellas. 'At the first read-through, my heart went into my mouth,' says Patricia Brake. 'There seemed to be an awful lot of non-actors.'

The worst of it was that, a) the two central relationships in the initial plot line were the most unlikely partnerships in the whole scenario, and b) the two youngsters in question had never spoken a line before. It would have taken teenage actors of unusual subtlety to get away with the roles of Dieter, the toyboy in the life of ageing nightclub chantoozie Trish Valentine, and Fizz, the child-bride of paunchy, goggle-eyed Bunny, let alone make them an attraction of the series. Looking back on it all, the seasoned professionals are indignant. 'How dare they pick people off the street and expect them to perform this stuff?' asks Hilary Crane (alias





Rosemary, half of that handsome retired couple, the Webbs). 'It's an insult to actors.'

The rush to the screen overrode normal professional caution. Some of the necessary set – a whole little whitewashed township, one brick thick, including an Old Town and a modern 'development' or 'urbanisation', as the Spanish have it – was not yet built. Many of the essential technical resources were not in place. No pilot episodes – no pilot *scenes* – were shot, so that the dreadful clangour of the recorded dialogue, battering its way back and forth between tiled floors and naked ceilings, was not discovered until, suddenly, shooting had begun in earnest. Agreed delivery dates demanded that what was shot had to go out.

Equity stalwarts learned to defend themselves ruthlessly. Jesse Birdsall, an unquestioned success as the smirkingly dimpling villain Marcus Tandy, realised early on that unsatisfactory takes were being accepted by directors simply because they had no time to reshoot them. 'It's known among some of the cast that if you're not happy with what you're doing in a take, don't finish it. Because once you've finished it, they go "Right! Onwards!"' Not only was the rhythm of work too pressing, but as many as 32 running characters, of several nationalities, were being kept before the audience. Some of them in early episodes were speaking foreign languages, in brief but unsubtitled bursts. Others were speaking English just as impenetrably, thanks to the acoustics. Bill Lucas, one of the cast veterans, playing the bearded Eeyore Stanley Webb,

'Even though it's ending, we haven't lost the audience'

A technician removes the last light from the set, which may now be turned into a tourist attraction

watched the playback of the first three instalments. 'It cost me a night's sleep.' He never went to any more screenings.

One viewer reacted even more negatively. Corinne Hollingworth, who took over the whole operation from Julia Smith in August 1992, turning an embarrassment into a going concern, was unconnected with the show when she saw Episode One. 'After that, I didn't watch any more. I was put off by that first episode.' She hated the 'saucy' generation-bridging relationships: 'There was something very distasteful about the whole thing, I felt: this overweight, middle-aged man and his child wife, and Trish and her toyboy – it was unbelievable and distasteful.'

She insists that it was the characters' failure to work that made the actors' task impossible and not the other way round, which sounds like

over-generosity to the stricken young luvvies, though she defends it ingeniously. 'Frankly, in virtually every soap there are certain actors who are not very good; but they play characters that are extremely attractive, and believable. Basically, these sort of programmes don't stand or fall on the quality of the acting, but the quality of the *character*.' The cast knew, as Corinne came in, that the axe was about to be wielded, and some who survived felt lucky to be spared. 'You read in the press that they killed the bad actors, but in the first few episodes, I was a bad actor,' says Franco Rey. 'The chop could have fallen on me as well. I was crap. Working with two crews, sometimes three crews at once, I was a pack of nerves. But you have to be blind not to see the change in Eldorado from the 6th of July last year to the product that's coming out now. I'm satisfied. I've got nothing to be embarrassed about.'

There is no doubt at all who has seen more of Eldorado, good and bad, than any other living being. Dubbing mixer Keron Steele was one of the first in, back in April 1992, and will have been the very last out. He finished on May 30, after turning the final, yet-to-be-seen episodes into seamless aural blends. In the latter days, it was taking him between 15 and 17 hours per episode to knit together a convincing mixture of speech, incidental sounds, naturalistic backgrounds and effects. This compares with 80 or 90 hours' dubbing per episode in the early days, so rough was the footage they were feeding him. 'One and a half hours of drama a week is a *huge* output, and we were bundled straight

into it. Then Corinne arrived, and wallop, things changed. People were prepared to listen a lot more, and things got resolved. And when the script editors started coming out here, it made a huge difference. Suddenly there were storylines that related to what was actually going on.'

Not everything could be comfortably accommodated in a family soap. 'There's a lot of people living along the Spanish coast who've ducked out for all kinds of reasons. There's a lot of very criminal, or borderline criminal elements out here. A lot of very Flash Harrys in their big Jeep Renegades, you know. And there's a huge drug problem here. You've got the seedier side of Spain: apparently, a lot of the girls end up moving off into the porno element, that's obviously very sad... all these things are accepted as normal down here. But not on British television, before nine o'clock. I think the real story is horrendous.'

Equally X-rated has been the interchange of affections among the personnel trapped in this industrial cocoon halfway up a mountain in a pine wood. 'This production,' Keron Steele says, 'has caused a lot of family heartbreak. On film shoots where people are going away for ten or 12 weeks, you get romantic interludes building up, but they never get further than a sort of infatuation. But here, away for a year, people have become so detached that things have gone a long way too far. Some people are going to have big problems going home.'

As disturbing to Steele as any of the incidental hanky-panky has been the strictly traditional

way he's seen the permanent expat British residents behave. 'We live near Calahonda, the English community on which Eldorado is based. And as an English person living here, I feel embarrassed. You walk into the supermarkets and see people making no attempt to speak Spanish. They have that English arrogance, the English Abroad. If they can't make themselves understood, they *do* shout.'

Most of the cast and crew have had similar feelings on their conscience. Campbell Morrison remembers cooking for himself in the early days, because he couldn't order in restaurants, and then almost bursting into tears at the butcher's, 'when I realised I couldn't even ask for *effing mince*'. But he worked at it, inspired by a quite openly idealistic feeling the cast seem to share about the common European future. Their year as 'Costa-mongers' has left them with no time for standard British xenophobia. On the contrary, they take a pride in the fact that Eldorado has been the first work of popular television fiction to offer a vision of what it might really be like to 'play a part in Europe'.

So here they are, on the last days of filming, doing it for the last time. One by one, and two by two, they are reaching their final scenes. Franco Rey, after hearing his last call of 'Cut!', embraces a couple of colleagues swiftly and sprints away, too moved to speak. He is one of the actors who have taken immediate filming work elsewhere, to try to put the distress of this termination behind him. Bill Lucas and Hilary Crane, the Webbs, complete in a more leisurely

way, working through eight takes on an awkward little scene by the poolside. Affectionately mocking applause greets the approval of the final take, and Hilary replies with 'Up yours!' and a grandiloquent V-sign, amid general laughter. She still has the odd bit to do solo, but Bill is finished. He's been a bit disappointed at how passively his character turned out, so he would have been leaving anyway after this year of work. The great bonus for him is that the arthritis he developed a few months before he came to Spain has entirely disappeared.

Roland Curram is taking down posters in his dressing room on 'Ego Square', as he calls it. Pictures of fellow cast-members, too - he really must have enjoyed his year. 'It has been the most interesting job I've ever done in my life. Three scripts every Friday - it's taught me to think on my feet, and adapt like crazy. I'm very proud of having created an original character: a middle-aged gay man who is "out", who doesn't mince, swing a handbag or lisp, who has been a family man, and is accepted by people and is upbeat... it's quite an achievement.'

His character, Freddie, has certainly been the most rounded and popular gay character ever projected by a British soap, and any Eldorado acting award would have to short-list Curram's evocation of bottled-up misery over the death of young Javier, the object of his affections. 'The letters I had from people who had been forced to hide their griefs... incredible! Hundreds!' Curram is one of those who sees himself returning, after a rest, to the stage, though he

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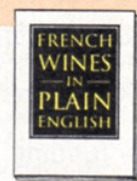
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cannot imagine what it will be like to resume theatrical rhythms of preparation. 'When I was at the National, we rehearsed for *eight weeks*. Even on a normal telly you get three weeks.' Campbell Morrison has similar fears. 'We'll all be saying, what are we *doing* here, why aren't we performing it *now*?'

Friday, May 14, arrives. One crew and a couple of actors were working late last night, doing shots on a yacht for the mysterious Episode 158 – the very end of the story, in fact, described with exquisite coyness in the shooting-synopsis as 'Something occurs'. (Corinne Hollingworth, more helpfully, defines the scene as a 'reward', for faithful viewers, 'something they want to see'.) Following the yacht along the balmy coast, after midnight, in an auxiliary speedboat carrying Spanish Red Cross men, I reflected that the actor's life is not all hardship. You don't just suspend reality for other people, you have it suspended on your behalf. Some of it is fun.

But this Friday morning really is the end. One crew member celebrates the day by turning out in one of the famous 'Another Shitty Day in Paradise' T-shirts which were all the rage among the unit some months ago. But he's crossed 'Another' out, and written 'The Last' instead. The hard-working Lockheads are just getting into shot 345. Campbell Morrison calls me over to take a peek at the script. 'Look what we've got to say: *DREW: Will you miss all this? GWEN: Hard not to, I suppose.*' The sun comes out to illuminate the ironies and put a sparkle on the swimming-pool. Spanish cleaning ladies are

moving quietly about the urbanisation, sweeping and brushing just as if it were real.

Campbell is agitating for me to appear as an extra, just for fun, at a table in the far background. 'I'll have to ring my agent,' I call over. 'Too expensive!' chorus the Lockheads in impressive unison. They seem happy enough. I don't think they can be part of the eight-strong team of disaffected actors who, I have been very privately informed, are planning to sue the Spanish production company. I rather hope it comes to nothing. Everyone's suffered enough.

Verity Lambert has flown in to see the life of her project drawing peacefully to its close. (It will not be all that peaceful, since there seems to be a lot of stunt-work on the menu, not to mention a lurking dummy car which – it is no secret – is destined to explode.) It is very much a private visit. Verity has already hosted the big farewell party, two weeks ago, before people started dribbling away. So it's just a quick goodbye and back to London tomorrow morning early, in time to get to Wembley for the Cup Final (she's an Arsenal supporter).

I ask her whether the rumour is true that a middle way was offered in the BBC negotiations, allowing the series another few months of life. 'There was some discussion as to whether it should go on for another six months, but I felt that was an unacceptable compromise. I thought renewing it for six months would look exactly like what it was – giving Alan [Yentob] a chance to develop something else.' Perhaps pride got in the way here. Given a thinking-space, the

Controller might have reversed his decision. He will not have failed to notice that, as Verity Lambert put it, 'even though it's ending, we haven't lost the audience.' Indeed, an *Evening Standard* article faxed into the publicity office on the penultimate day of filming makes the point vehemently: 'It is unfortunate for Alan Yentob, the new Controller of BBC1, that the soap he axed on arrival, *Eldorado*, is now doing better than the much-hyped real-life soap from Australia, *Sylvania Waters*... *Eldorado* is thriving, with a place in the top 25 for the third week in a row. Its Monday-night edition came in at an all-time high – at number 20 – with 6.67 million viewers.'

It will be another of the painful ironies of the *Eldorado* story if its viewership reaches the magic, life-saving pinnacle of ten million at the very moment of its demise, with Episode 158. Everybody on this project has made mistakes. But perhaps the biggest mistake of all was to turn off its life-support system just as the thing had begun to breathe.

Now it's a deserted set on a Mediterranean hillside, waiting for something to happen. For a while, at least, the village of Los Barcos is to be opened as a tourist attraction. Trish Valentine's love nest, Marcus Tandy's riding stables and lunch thrown in – all at £15 a head. At that rate, to take a family of five round would cost nearly as much as the BBC licence fee, but no doubt some will pay it, and then go home to grumble about the profligacy of the Corporation. It's a barmy world, and a cruel one, and if it weren't, we wouldn't need soaps.

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