



Grade: From Albert Square to Brookside Close



New channel for the right to reply



Channel Four sport on the offensive

## TELEVISION

## What Hakes The Grade?

Last month Michael Grade replaced Jeremy Isaacs as chief executive of Channel 4. **Mark Uvson** looks at a man who may surprise us all

'May God forgive us.' The unknowing, thrown that quote in the 'who said what' section of one of those ubiquitous new year quizzes, would, I suppose, have plumped for some major atrocity. For who would think to associate such ripe self-condemnation with the leadership succession at a minority television channel? But such was the comment of Anthony Smith, board member of Channel 4 and habitual unsuccessful applicant for every top job in broadcasting, including that of chief executive of C4, which Michael Grade had just got and for which act God's forgiveness was sought by Smith. Or take a subsequent remark: 'I am handing him a sacred trust. If he betrays it, I will personally come round and throttle him.' Thus Jeremy Isaacs, father and outgoing controller of the channel, on the incoming Mr Grade.

Grade arrived at Channel 4 last month. It is too early for him to have affected the ethos or schedules of the place very much. We can, however, see many of the decisions facing him and guess at his responses. Here are 10 things you probably didn't know about Grade:

1) Image. The instant knee-jerk reaction was to suggest that the minority channel had opted for a majority man, a vulgarian and philistine. One of Grade's problems is going to be that any mainstream innovation will be seen as cheapening. *Countdown* and *A Woman of Substance* were taken as evidence of Jeremy Isaacs having a foot in the real world of ratings. Under Grade, all the *'Roland Rat* to front *A Week In Politics'* stuff will surface. But, as we shall see, Grade is

a complex sort of populist, as populists go.

2) Heroes. It is difficult to categorise a man whose admiration extends with almost equal fervour towards Dennis Potter and Bill Cotton jr, between whom the only possible similarity is a vague connection with big band music. It is in Grade's favour that he personally shepherded through *The Singing Detective* (keeping the sex episode intact), a season of Potter's early work and the rescue from oblivion of *Brimstone and Treacle* and yet his closest alliance professionally has been with Cotton, a man whose philistine dictatorship of taste at the BBC has been, throughout the 70s and 80s, the curse of playwrights and directors.

How do we equate this? The answer, I think, is that Grade has a genuine belief in Potter as a writer and televisual innovator but also spots in him a box office showman: his stuff is always, in every sense of the word, 'sexy'. As for Cotton, Grade thanks the man for much of his own career (he brought him to the BBC). The good news, then, is the possibility of such talents as Potter and Ken Trodd working for Channel 4. The bad news is that reports have already linked Cotton with a transfer to Channel 4 HQ.

3) Politics. According to reliable accounts, Grade saw the *Falklands Play*, the controversially-abandoned drama by Ian Curteis, for the crude Thatcher hagiography it was. He is certainly not as right wing and 'all decent people think' as Cotton but then few men are. He was in favour of the privatisation of Channel 4 but, at the request of his new board, has publicly changed his mind. His

close friends include Jeffrey Archer. Take your pick. He has protected his personal political leanings very well but some observers suspect a centrist with perhaps an admiration for the charisma of Dr Owen. He is unlikely, however, to impose a political agenda on the channel.

4) Minorities. In BBC terms, his record is glowing. *The Black and White Media Show* and *Putting Women in the Picture* were Grade-backed documentaries, scheduled at peak time, in which the BBC record on the promotion and representation of blacks and women was attacked. Whether the concern extended beyond self-flagellation to action is a moot point but *EastEnders* (which Grade backed and made a hit) has brought

as controller. Birt took it downmarket and instituted the spate of game shows under Alan Boyd which saw the revival of Cilia Black's career.

6) Stars. Grade has a crucial weakness for the megastar theory of television. An LWT regime marked by the creation of *The South Bank Show* and *Weekend World* was marred by *Bruce's Big Night*, two-and-a-half-hours of Bruce Forsyth on Saturday evenings. Also note *Wogan* at the BBC, another Grade innovation. This tendency is probably Grade's tragic flaw. Watch it.

7) Arts. The smart money is on Grade finding little common ground with Channel 4's head of arts, Michael Kustow. Grade is a man who has educated himself culturally through television and will almost certainly push for arts strands more consumer-friendly than those provided by Kustow.

8) Independents. Grade is known to take a pessimistic view of the overall standard of independent companies. He believes that some Channel 4 series are of a technical sloppiness which would not be tolerated elsewhere. The problem is that there is no obvious way of raising standards, given that the channel does not make its own programmes.

9) Scheduling. It is a peculiar talent to have but Grade has an unrivalled eye and nose for what goes where. There is little doubt that he can raise the channel's ratings but the worry must be that he would push ever upwards. Isaacs has pointed out that the only week in which Channel 4 ever hit the 10% was the *Woman of Substance* one, in which foreign language and minority programmes were sacrificed.

10) Conclusion. Entering its tricky second stage of deciding where it wants to be in relation to the other options, Channel 4 has chosen a man who will focus attention on their Charlotte Street HQ. No-one should patronise Grade. He is a clever and complex professional. May God forgive Anthony Smith. •



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blacks and gays to soap opera and, if you doubt the significance of that achievement, look at the socially retrograde *Coronation Street*.

Other BBC series from Grade's time - like *King of the Ghetto* and *Black Silk* - at least extended the range of work available to black actors. Grade is unfussily liberal in these matters but he is moving from a place where these issues could be a 'sexy' personal crusade to one where they are in the air. Expect, however, no slipping back of standards.

5) John Birt. One of the cruellest parodies of fact is the one which, while branding Grade a philistine, holds up John Birt, the BBC's new deputy director general, as a deep thinker of radical ideas. Look at the progress of LWT when Birt succeeded Grade