

# Tony Jordan interview: 'The BBC should bring back Eldorado'

The former EastEnders scriptwriter reveals he sheds tears for his characters and wants to create a new soap



**Vicky Frost**

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Television writer and producer Tony Jordan. Photograph: Frantzesco Kangaris for the Guardian

"I'm really hating that I'm saying this, because I know that I've written your headline for you," Tony Jordan says, with a good-humoured giggle. "But I think we should bring Eldorado back." The former EastEnders series consultant is in ebullient form, arguing for the return of the BBC's doomed early 90s soap, Eldorado, sent to an early grave after only one year on screen.

"It's a fantastic brand – although obviously not in the way it was first done, and I wrote the first episode so I'm allowed to say that," he laughs. Jordan recounts watching the director's monitor and realising how bad the opening show was: "It was one of the worst things I'd seen in my life. I remember phoning one of the other writers and saying: 'We're in shit. It's like fucking Thunderbirds. We're in trouble!'"

And yet it did improve. By the end of its run the viewing figures were stronger, and there was a sense of affection for the soap, he claims. Eldorado 2011 would be a completely different thing – but the idea, Jordan believes, was sound.

It is hard to resist his argument, not least because of Jordan's first-class soap background and his unstuffy, relaxed manner. His first writing job, in his early 30s, was on EastEnders and he only stopped working for the show for the second time five years ago. Now he is concentrating on his company Red Planet Pictures, which has produced new BBC1 drama Death in Paradise, written by first-time TV writer Robert Thorogood.

"Most television is written by the same 12 old farts – I include myself. It's the same writers who keep popping up over and over again," Jordan says. And so Red Planet runs an annual competition to uncover writers; Thorogood was a finalist. "To find a new generation of writers and then to mentor them through the process is quite exciting. I know how tough it is. How lonely it is. I've got rejection letters in my cabinet."

That Jordan ended up in television was unexpected, to say the least. Encouraged by his neighbour, an aspiring scriptwriter, market trader Jordan, who had left school at 14, wrote a script and sent it off to EastEnders "for a bet". They liked it. But they also seemed to believe that Jordan was an East End barrow boy. (In fact, he is from Southport and his accent goes by way of Bristol). So he went to see them and "did my very best Dick Van Dyke impression".

"The only thing I didn't say was 'Cor blimey Mary Poppins!', but I was nearly there," he laughs. Astonishingly he kept the act up for four years, during which he was regarded as a kind of East End oracle. "That's why the Mitchell brothers never had tattoos. They

said: 'What kind of tattoos would they have?' I didn't know so I just said: 'Nah. No tattoos. Not in the real East End.' So they scrapped them."

Jordan remains an advocate for the soaps as a great place for new writers to learn their craft. "The beauty of soap is that you write it and then it's on screen immediately, so you learn from your mistakes constantly. You see if what's on screen works or doesn't and that's invaluable." And he thinks the UK could perhaps use a new soap – hence his Eldorado suggestion.

Some would argue that there already is a new breed of soaps: the structured reality shows such as *The Only Way is Essex* that have fast established themselves in the schedules. Jordan seems interested by not entirely convinced. "You don't want television to start to eat itself," he warns. "Essex had a joy and a warmth and a heart to it when it first started, but now they're all celebrities." The result, he suggests, is that nothing on the show feels real any more; events have become too big and too staged.

"At the moment people are doing it as a grotesque freak show and I don't think anyone is seeing the possibilities – real people that you can identify with that you can see something of yourself in," he says. "They're all still about looking for the slaps and the dumpings, and the big drama and the big moments, and the beauty of soap is the minutiae."

As to whether he is the man to develop that in a form to deliver big mainstream audiences, well he might have been – if someone else hadn't got in first. "Fucking cheek!" he exclaims with some delight, as he recounts a meeting that morning. "I finished my pitch with 'And I'm the man to do it!' and they said: 'Well no, actually, you're not'."

Jordan doesn't seem the type to take offence. He is funny, generous company with a nice line in self-deprecation. And he admits he loves a good cry – *The X Factor's* sob stories, while obvious and manufactured, get him every time. Although he hates the show for being so cynical, he loves it because it affects him. "Really it's only *Jukebox Jury* or *Opportunity Knocks*. Just sexed up. Simon Cowell is just Hughie Green in big trousers. It's not a secret. He hasn't discovered the holy grail."

So would he make a big entertainment show if it was the right idea? "Yes, because I just want to make good telly."

Jordan certainly puts himself through the wringer to write drama – letting his characters fight it out in his head so he can record their dialogue, all the while "crying and blowing snot bubbles". He is collaborative by nature – he developed *Life on Mars* with Ashley Pharoah and Matthew Graham during a Blackpool weekend when they were desperate to rewrite *The Sweeney* ("So we reincarnated Jack Regan as Gene Hunt"). And he also thinks other people can help to make him look good by association.

Surely that's just modesty and he doesn't mean it? "Well, I do a bit. I get a bit scared. It's quite a tough process to write something like *The Nativity* on your own," says Jordan, who describes himself as not "the best writer in the world". Although that doesn't mean he doesn't feel a prick of annoyance at being edited. He has a hilarious riff about delivering his script "like a new baby" only to have it scribbled upon by people with marker pens.

Despite 20 years in the business, he still sees himself as an industry outsider – sticking to his guns when pressed. "I don't do the thing. I don't do the stuff. I live in Bedfordshire. When everyone else is meeting for canapes at Soho House, I'm mucking out my chickens and trying to fend off the fucking homicidal goats and a parrot that hates me with a vengeance and someone has taught to say 'Wanker!'"

He never aspired to be a writer, he says. "I love it. But if I could earn the same money back on the markets – I'd be looking for a van tomorrow morning." Really? I am taken aback. But Jordan is serious. "I get a bit weary with it sometimes, sitting until two or three in the morning, blowing snot bubbles, breaking my heart," he says. "That's no way to make a living."

*Death in Paradise* is on BBC1 tomorrow night at 9pm

## CV

**Age** 54

**Education** Broadlands Comprehensive, Keynsham near Bristol

**Career 1971-89** factories/building sites/fairgrounds/market trader **1979-86, 1988-94** writer, Minder, ITV **1986-92** writer, Boon, ITV **1989-2007** writer, chief storyline consultant, EastEnders **1992** writer, Eldorado **2004** created Hustle **2006** co-created Life on Mars **2007** founded Red Planet Pictures **2008-09** writer and producer, Moving Wallpaper **2010** writer and producer, The Nativity

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