



Creative Careers Surgery Interview Transcript.

Name: Ian Kennedy, Script Writer and Producer

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Creative Industry: Radio

Indeed this is the Creative Career Surgery where we help you to get clued up and be creative and on the show today we have got Ian Kennedy, Ian how are you?

All is well.

So Ian if someone was to come up to you and introduce themselves and say, what do you do for a living? What would you say, and how would you describe your day-to-day routine?

My simple answer would be 'I work in the media'.

Then they will usually ask 'oh yes what do you do'?

And I will say 'well mostly script writing and production stuff like that' so that is the short hand of it, obviously the stories that go with it can take a lot longer but my daily routine typically as a freelancer you are working at home on your own steam, unless you have got an office somewhere the chances are that you will be working often in your own bedroom as in my case but it is a nice bedroom, so a nicely equipped area to work in. I think that if you are working from home you need a pleasantly laid out space, you are just comfortable in, you are not going to tire off, sometimes you need a view out so there is something always changing, or you want to be boxed in white walls where you don't see a thing so you have nothing to think about except your work, either of those is good. So my daily routine would be to get up, get dressed whatever, start work simple as that. You know in many cases you save two hours a day by not having to do any commuting so occasionally you will have to travel out for an interview like right now but typically it will be working from home all of the time and just picking it up whatever is the most useful and important thing you could be doing at that time. So often there will be emails to pick up, to follow up on, some things more urgent than others, it is always a matter of you need a lot of self discipline for it, always a matter of judging your work load and above all choosing the most important thing you could be doing your day would be. Also not to get sidetracked too much into 5 projects and speculative things that may not pay or

may not pay for a very long time when there's more direct ways to succeed closer to home which you could be pursuing more productively.

And can you give us an example (and I suppose it changes on the project that you are doing) can you give us an example from the last two weeks of your life, describe what you were doing from Monday a fortnight Monday) in terms of your soap opera on BBC Asian network, or whether it was checking e-mails or doing networking sessions that type of thing.

Ok looking back two weeks ago on Monday, I had a meeting on 'Silver Street' because I put in the first draft of a script that I was working on, there is a 3 stage process with scripts.

You get sent the details of what it is that you have got to write; you then judge how to do it. You tell them the structure of what you have got in mind. There are a lot of different constraints about how you can do that which I could explain at more length but basically you submit your proposal about how that might work out within your week of episodes, so there is a week of episodes rather than a particular characters or storylines that you get commissioned to do, so you submit that, and then a couple of days later get feedback upon that and because I live quite close to The Mailbox in Birmingham which is where the 'Silver Street' is made, I will typically come into the office for an interview, for a meeting to discuss all of that so you get your feedback, that could last about 2 hours and then you go away and you write those episodes and submit those. 2 weeks ago on Monday I was at the stage of having submitted that, and we had a meeting to discuss the first drafts and then set out how to make final changes for the second draft, final changes and adaptations to make and if there were any changing factors like if a particular research issue had come up with a problem that came up which needed altering in the scripts of anything like that. I then went away and spent until Friday working on that, in the intervening time, say in the evening I might have met with the director of a television drama that I am working on, so making other time for other things where necessary but obviously that take priority, not just because it pays but also it has got a deadline, whereas most of my other work doesn't. So that was that week then I submitted on midday on the Friday, had the afternoon of that to peruse other projects and just get as much as I could in that space of time. Then the follow week, I went to what is becoming a bit of a day job for me at 'What's On UK' which is a public publishing firm which produce a lot of guides to London and going out and things like that and music and entertainment and things like that, loads of different guides published on a monthly or an annual basis and for them I have been doing some contributions of content and material suggesting stories and things like that. I have been developing the organisation in other ways, making proposals for organisational change and modernisation of computer systems and things like that so that is becoming a bit of a day job where I can come into whenever I am available or whenever there is a particular job I need to be doing and getting on with but otherwise staying away to get on with my own things. So I think that it is very

useful to have a very flexible, alternate source of income that is a bit steadier than writing or production related if you are a freelancer.

I can imagine because I had a writer on the show before, a novelist a slightly different discipline but he did say, which is sort of what you are saying, that writing is not something that you get paid for everyday, sometimes you spend a lot of time developing and it could be that you have to develop an idea and write it before anyone buys (the concept) off you. Can you maybe give us an example of maybe one of those ideas and also I suppose the percentage of your time, how much of it is paid work and how much of it is development and as you say following up calls or following up projects?

I would think that only a third of my time is spent on actual outright paid work unless I am in a position that I need to concentrate on paid work for money reasons so in the current case I can go into what's on and just get on with things, but typically no I am only spending a third of my time on that firstly because 'Silver Street' is not enough to live on and it is not steady and it is not continual but it does give enough as a sort of bulk work for my projects it is there as my sort of default, at the very least, if everything goes wrong, at least for the foreseeable future until they get rid of me, I am a 'Silver Street' writer and I can fall back on that as something that is giving a bit of structure to my writing existence so I would say that I spend a third of my time on paid work, the rest of it is a matter of what you invest I think, if you are not being paid for it you have to view it as an investment because you might just sit here thinking 'I am sitting here not being paid but that does not cost me anything, well that is not true actually you have still got your living costs, you have still got all the basics to keep yourself going, if you are spending working time on something that is not paying you upfront, or even in the short term then you are investing actually you need to calculate a daily rate for yourself of maybe £60 a day minimum of how much it is costing you to get on with that stuff and so even though I spend 50% of my time I reckon developing new projects, researching meeting with colleagues to get those projects off the ground, I can only afford to do that because of the relative security that I get from having a continuing role with a series like 'Silver Street' and also with a role with what is on so that I can pick up as I please in many ways. So without the security I could not spend anything like the amount of time I do on developing projects.

That is really important that you have said that in terms of you have got your paid stuff which is now established in what you do, but how important do you think that it is in the industry to actually come to the table with ideas as opposed to having a great portfolio and saying 'here give me a job what can I do'?

I think going to people and saying 'here give me a job' is the way that everyone expects is to work, and it can work if you are brilliant if you can work and if you know the right people and you have got something which is so right now and important and vital and they could not think of anyone else but you to do it for them because you have expressed it that brilliantly, then yes you can go and get that break but that is very rare, much more common is that people who are like that, who are so driven to do something very distinctive end up ploughing their own and if they are lucky they will get a gig at some point along the line but the people that tend to prosper the most are actually the more amenable ones who are happy to work on someone else's project who have not got an attitude of being too precious about their work. Being able to take feedback, criticism if necessary and not to take any knock backs personally and so in that sense being attached to a series like 'Silver Street' or any other continuing drama is in many ways ideal for an aspiring writer because firstly you can not afford you can not afford not to respect the people that you are working for and I think that humility can go a long way especially at the early stages because you do have a lot to learn. You may have lots of brilliant ideas and be very fond at writing in a stylish way and anything like that but in terms of delivering that into a finished product, especially if it is not a novel as in it requires other people to realise it, you really need to have that understanding of who else it takes to make your script or whatever it is you are writing so being a relatively subservient of a bigger team, and not being in control of it directly even though you can give back ideas and give suggestions and that sort of thing is a very good way to start out in terms of having the right attitude to work and gaining through doing it the incidental understanding of how the industry actually works, who are the movers and the shakers, who you work with, who you can work with, the sort of projects that you can do successfully and where you just feel that you couldn't fit in and what you really could not bring yourself to do? I think that those things can help a great deal for getting off the ground and if you look at the famous TV script writers and people like that, the likes of people like Paul Abbot of course started on 'Coronation Street' at a very young age Jimmy McGovern, the man behind 'Cracker' and 'The Street', he is another one that started in soap and Tony Jordan as well started in 'Eastenders' and Russell T. Davies also I believe started in soap. So they are I would say four of the biggest people in terms of success of writers in that area and all of them started on someone else's show and from there was able to gain understanding of how the industry works, gaining continual feedback on their work because of course if you submit a script for a show you will get feedback on it and you will have to change it, especially for TV, changes can be very Adcock and sudden if your lead actor in a soap has just been exposed in some drug scandal and needs to be written out of the series, suddenly you have to throw away lots of the stuff that you were doing and do it all again, so an understanding of how things work can really help you in getting things made and unless you are so singular and brilliant that you can be a Stephen Poliakoff and be the writer and director and have a massive part in the production as well, the chances are that if you are going to get anywhere to having some humility and learning from the people that are

already doing it and respecting them and providing for their needs rather than just going off on your own tangent.

So in a way you are a man of your own skill but at the same time you have got to be susceptible to your own boss and your client, in which case for this particular thing is the BBC?

Yes.

Lets talk about the other personal traits, you mentioned humility there, I think that is a nice one in regards to being a writer, you are there writing away and it becomes your baby in a way...

You have to learn to let go, that is the hardest thing and it is the reason why so many brilliant and so many talented writers don't get through is because either they can't distance themselves enough from their project to submit a script to let go and know that if it does get used it will not be in the way they expected it to...or just to working on a project and putting your heart and soul to something that you believe in for them that you still might find that it gets completely changed without your contribution to that just because of the way that these programmes are made and the way that these things work. That is a hard thing to learn and your attitude as a writer is ultimately the most important thing I think that will either get you over that first massive hurdle or not.

A nice piece of advice for people to remember. And for those people that maybe like the idea of becoming a script writer great or 'I don't know much about 'Silver Street'' for instance or the production process, can you give us a process for how something like Silver Street' is written and sort of the length of time it might take from...as you mentioned the producers might say 'right we are going to be tackling racism today' for instance, you come up with a storyline for a week from your actual script writing and then the final production. Can you talk us through in real bullet point stages of all of those elements until it goes live?

Sure, well there were 2 different sorts of staff that you can identify on a show like 'Silver Street', you have got the permanent full-time staff which include the editors and the director, the editor of the show and those sort of people, researchers, people doing the archiving so keeping a record of what has gone out on air previously so that we do not contradict ourselves later and things like that and also just co-ordinate the production so that you get the right actors in for the right studio on the day and that sort of thing. So you have people doing permanent things like that in your research and so on. But also you have everyone else, so if it is an actor they will get called up to come in on a particular day along with the other actors that are required for the scenes that they are in so they will come in and do a read through of the script with the rest of the cast and then it will be recorded. Then the other people who are like that are the writers, obviously we are contributors in a

similar kind of way in that we are not permanently employed on the series but we are paid a lump sum in order to dedicate a particular amount of time to deliver a particular product that fits into the wider scheme of things. In terms of where stories come from in the production process...it begins typically in the case of 'Silver Street' in a quarterly meeting, we will meet every 3 months to discuss where we are at, with our different characters and story lines and where we would like to go, any new areas we would like to develop and the sign of a programme which I often think is doing quite well is that you don't need to keep inventing new things that you want to include 'I think we need an explosion or we need to kill a load of people' and that sort of thing, if the stories that you have got are propelling themselves forward then that is a good sign that you have got something that is sustainable that is not going to all of a sudden require lots of desperate explosion developments in order to keep people's attention. So we will discuss stories and characters, any new characters that we would like to bring in, anyone we would like to get rid of and that sort of thing and any logistical changes like if you lose an actor like they are moving abroad or on to other projects. Do we want to in the case of 'Silver Street, to do a re-cast because it being radio we can get away with that or do we want to get rid of that character in some way or just have them disappear, it is easily done with radio people can be referred to without being there at all so that is what we are discussing at a quarterly basis but then it goes to the permanent editorial staff, so you have got the editor, the directors and producers all discussing on a more focussed level 'right, here is our next four weeks', they will lay out what has got to go into them so they will lay out in bullet point terms in of the four weeks, what happens in it, and it will be quite a skeletal document that will just say that these are things that will happen and so that flows in one to the next obviously and then one week will be commissioned to someone perhaps myself, the second week to someone else and so on so all four weeks are commissioned to someone and they are written at the same time by those four writers and edited at the same time by the editors and there is a feedback process as I was mentioning earlier you submit your synopsis of how it will play out then you will have feedback on that, then you have a first draft and then you have feedback on that, then you will put in a second draft and maybe you will be asked to do last minute changes to that as well. Then with all that done, and this is going on continuously whilst that is being developed, the production team will be co-ordinating 'right, this is where stuff has to happen, we will need to set up our studio for this, this and this, these are the actors that we need in the same place at the same time and they are co-ordinating the schedule for that sort of thing and then of course with all that done you get to the point of actually recording it which involves bringing all the actors together, they will read through all of the particular scripts together and that will give everyone an indication of time because an episode has to be exactly right for time, that is one of the biggest challenges for what we do and so they will have read it through, then they will go away, most of them will be hanging around, acting does involve a great deal of hanging around, that is about 98% of your work as an actor, but then they will be called into their studio at the relevant times and they will be directed and they will perform

their parts, in the case of radio, they don't need to learn their lines because no one can see that they are reading from a script they just have to not hear you turning the pages. So it gets recorded and then the next job is to edit it, the initial editing is done by one of the assistant producers rather than the senior staff and they will get a rough cut together that will identify particular things that might need changing, if further cuts need to be made and so on and that will then be done by them in conjunction with the editor of the series or the director in question and then out of that you then have an episode which is the right length and hopefully has not cut out too much essential dialogue and action, and then from there it is almost ready to go to air. You will have a lot of sound effects that have been done on the spot but you will also add in music and things like that which editing would really mess up. If you have recorded music in the background, say it was a café scene, but then you cut out a chunk of dialogue suddenly the music would jar, and we are quite inventive with music we have a lot of youth music groups and mixing and stuff like that going on, that is all done after you have prepared your main material. So then you have got your finished episode with your titles and your main sounds and that sort of thing with your theme tune on and that is passed off on a CD or whatever, a computer file to the relevant studio and on the relevant day your presenter (in our case Nikki Bedi on BBC Asian Network) will present it, it will play out and afterwards she will have a little chat about it, invites people's comments and that sort of thing and obviously being radio, TV doesn't tend to work like that. TV is not interactive in nearly the same way, but the great thing about radio, is that it is easier to find out what your listeners actually think of your programme and anything that you would like to do differently.

That sounds like a very extensive time for you, you explain that so well, I can just see everyone working away in the studio, and how long does that normally take that whole span?

Well the quarterly meetings are once every 3 months and I would say that the first things coming out of it going on air would be at least 3 months.

That is quite a long time.

It is so sometimes we get hit by things at short notice such things as topical inserts, if something that is going on in the outside World that is so important to our characters in some way that it needs to be mentioned, for instance if there is a general election going on then we will often at quite short notice make sudden changes to things which obviously is a further issue, we need to get actors in the studio on the day, new script for the section in question written on the day and that sort of thing so of course that is a very hard thing to get right when you are still in the heat of the moment in something happening, but some stuff is so important that you need to deal with it immediately otherwise you are not being representative at all and we have a capacity to do that in a way that television drama really cant.

I suppose that is a plus point, I guess that is quite a personal trait as well in regards to being able to adapt quite quickly. As a writer and a radio producer what other personal traits do you think you need to be successful?

I have talked about humility, recognising that you will need to have bosses, you like to think of yourself as the singularity to what you do is the bible and then that is literally as written it is so, that is not the case at all. What is important is having more people that more powerful and important than yourself, who will often you will need to be very nice to; at the very least you need to have the ability to not be arrogant and condescending with those people but also you will need to actually respect where they are coming from because they will be able to see through you if you can't be able to work for them, that is the type of person that they want to work with, for obvious reasons so whatever it is you are doing you will need to work closely, if you are a novelist, it will need to be your publisher, or your agent or people like that, there will always be people contributing so I think that that is a very strong personal trait that goes across the whole of this industry really, it is great to have ideas, vision and leadership and sometimes it can be hard to hang on to those things when it feels like you are at a non-descript end of the industry, it is great to have leadership and initiative and that sort of thing, but you also have to have a practical head on your shoulders with a realistic game plan for your long term development to get to that point because you can not be expected to be given the chance straight away.

That is quite a nice bit of advice in regards to the personal bits that you need to do. And what technical things do you need to be a writer and a producer, do you need to know how to edit, do you need to know any particular software on the computer?

Most people tend to specialise in whatever it is they do specifically. I actually don't, I am quite unusual that I can pick up any part of the work and do it to a satisfactory degree, I have got skills with digital editing software, not just audio, but also for video production nowadays which helps you discuss with your producer and your director in a more constructive way because they are never blinding you with science and you can physically understand and visualise what it is you are expecting everyone else around you to do in order to realise your work, and I think that that is what my distinction as a script writer is a clear active sense of what it takes to produce this work, so I can work more closely in many ways with the producers and the editors than what most script writers can because they can give me a production brief in terms of what my script would need to be rather than having to tailor me to whatever is possible after they have seen what I am suggesting.

So understanding the process is what you think is one of your distinctions.

I think the very least you need (and this is my personal opinion) is to understand what everyone else who helps make your piece work has to do in order to do that. I think if you have that understanding and you genuinely appreciate those people not just think I'm a writer, so this person is inferior to me, if you have that sort of attitude you are unlikely to prosper. You have got to value all the team around you and all the people you work with, in that sense, that's a personal trait but the technical skills, certainly not as a script writer, technical skills aren't necessary though being able to format your work appropriately is surprisingly important. So find out how to do it, the BBC website has got the writer's room which has got plenty of examples of scripts, but you would be amazed how many people submit trial scripts and things like that that are very badly spelt and punctuated and that are just unreadable which obviously substantially puts people off from employing that writer, because however good the material is, if its hard work to even read, never mind edit and adjust, you're creating extra work for other people and this is a very time conscious industry where most people are fraught with business most of the time and you need to be creating as little work for them as possible. I think that is something they often value, people who are the least fussed to work with.

Fantastic so it's the idea that you've got to be really professional from the word go with what you deliver so people have got less work to do, so that they can work on adapting the storyline.

What are the best bits and the worst bits for you? What are the bits that make you think I love what I do and the bits that make you think, you know I really hate this?

The best bits are when you have little epiphanies, things that just suddenly click, like you've solved some massive problem, challenge or you've just had a real revelation of something extraordinary which you could do, write or realise. Sometimes they might come through meeting with someone, but usually its you in the privacy of your own home, by yourself, doing not a lot, and suddenly it comes to you in one way or another of a solution to something or just a brilliant idea. Those are the moments that I'm in it for and the downsides are all the other things you have to do in order to have those because the financial headache is most continuous because I'm always investing my time and outing in work on things and because I value them, say if it's a community project or a low paid production job that's for a good cause, I'll continuously put in work on things that I think are really great. But actually can I afford to? You have the constant issue of money, you need to stay focussed on that, a lot of people will take on a part time job, for example I believe that poets like Philip Larkin worked in a library all of his life and so on. It's often necessary to have some piece of the real world going on in your life just to keep your money ticking over and also to be in a place where you have colleagues, and a place where you can go to work. I think that does a lot to keep you sane. So it's easy to go off on one with

massive ideas and possibilities but you've got to be real as well. And that's the downside I think.

That's not a bad downside, you could have said something much work like I get constant headaches or I get the bailiffs knocking at my door

(Ha ha, I have to watch out for RSI)

We're going to jump straight to the industry stuff and we're going to try if we can to squeeze in your history because you've got such a great background, so for those who don't get to hear that part of the interview today, you've got a great website which we're going to talk about a little later where they can check all that out as well. So if someone's listened to the interview and thought, you know that's something I could see myself doing or I've actually got the skills that Ian has, what do you think, in terms of the industry that they're looking for, what is lacking in both script-writers and producers at the moment where people can look to find sort of their own niche?

I think if you do a bit of research and a bit of leg work you'll find there's a lot of fantastic means of support around here as someone starting out in the creative industry, look up people like the creative networks, look up people like creative launchpad see all the places like WCR and what they're up to. Find that stuff out because as a writer it's easy to spend all your time on your own in front of your computer dithering about whether it's ready to submit without really thinking about who you would submit to and where. I think be active and find out what sort of support and help there is for you. It depends a lot on what it is you want to write if you are a very singular writer, you couldn't bear to write for 'Hollyoaks', well you know that's great, if your work is going to get somewhere. But I think, to a degree it needs to have something that is not talked about enough when we're looking at getting these things working and that's impact. Yes you can write a good piece about domestic abuse you could make a short film of that, there are plenty of ways you could get that done to a very high professional standard, that sort of thing you can do, but who's going to pick that up and say, 'I want to employ this person now with a much bigger budget to do something full scale' You've always got to have in mind what it is that will have the impact in what you are doing. So if you can't fit into someone else's project or programme like 'Hollyoaks', 'The Archers' or 'Silver Street' and of course, competition for those is intense if you can't slot into those, or you don't get a break with one of them you've got to look at, 'what am I producing that will help me have an impact in order to get through' and I think that's my biggest remaining tip I suppose as to really getting your chance to make a start but do look at what's actually going on, too many people because they're wrapped up in their own work and they don't actually have any respect for what's out there on television or the work that's already being done they don't realise how many people are doing the stuff that they think they're the only one doing. So it's well worth knowing who's making programmes and what they are do watch a lot of TV and

listen to a lot of radio drama and stuff like that, you can't expect to be good at those things and also to know how to pitch something if you don't know what's been going out on air and what's been produced before. In many ways its good to get an idea and a sense of which producer is behind which programme, or whatever you enjoy because they'll like stuff that's in your style, if that's the way you write. But if you just send it off to everyone, most of them are going to say, 'well I only make science fiction what's that' or 'I only make period drama, that's nothing to do with me.' You need to know who you're actually approaching because if you're just going to people asking for a job obviously it takes something quite distinctive for them to go, 'oh yes, that's exactly what I'd like to do.'

So you're even more focussed in what you're able to do and in your own style, and say if this is you and you are talented, and you have lots of ideas to pitch to whether it's a radio station or whether it's a TV station or even if its publishing what do you think is most important in your industry? Do you think it's the experience that you've had the portfolio of work that you've got, the contacts that you've got, or is it something to do with your qualifications? What do you think is most important?

I think it's a question that comes up all the time; in order to succeed do you need to be simply brilliant at what you do or do you need to be in the right place at the right time and know the right people and I think that the answer is all three actually, I don't think you can get there without a strong combination of all of those. In my case I was fortunate in that in the previous year I had been a head writer in an award winning student radio series and most of our publicity didn't go very far but one person who did go very far is one who runs The Archers here at BBC Birmingham, and she invited me in to see the series, how they make it and so on, she couldn't really see a place for me with them but she thought with my street style was I interested and had I heard that there was a new series coming up in BBC Asian Network? Which wasn't yet on air, but I thought oh 'Silver Street', because I had known it was coming, and I looked at it and thought, "Wow, that sounds brilliant, shame I couldn't write for that!"

Oh how things change!

Exactly, so she put me in touch with the editor there and, the script editor I should say and so it came about, so that was a combination, I delivered a good product along with a big team, I should say that won an award, did a lot of promotion to try and get to know the right people, and thankfully one of the right people was interested, listened to loads of our episodes and was keen, and she put me in touch with people that were actually appointing at that time and were working on a new series, but a year later the drawbridge was largely up on 'Silver Street' because they'd got then a full size team of writers that was up to the job, and till those move on there's no space for the other talented people to get a break in. of course, three years on from that we're only now getting the first sort of people that have been waiting coming through into our team. So getting onto a continuing drama is very

difficult. But I think you have got to have that kind of combination, and you can work at all of them, don't think its just a matter of, 'well I don't have a Dad who runs hotbed media' you can get to know these people and if you've got the right attitude they will warm to you. So just work at it and know that you're break might not come immediately. But just keep working at it.

I was going to ask you for your final piece of advice, but I think that just said it all!

Ian Kennedy you've been fantastic thank you so much for coming on the show, I'm so sorry we didn't get to talk about your history and how you got there but can you give everybody your website address so they can check it out?

Yeah sure it seems to be offline today ironically enough but if you go to: www.iqkennedy.co.uk on any normal day, you'll find an extensive, basically a massive nicely formatted colourful CV but it tells you a lot about what I could do and what I could help you with or to realise creative projects of your own.

Ian Kennedy you've been fantastic.

Transcribed By Craig Wakeling

