

What is the way forward for Blake's 7?

Avon to be recast. Chris Boucher in talks. Clamp down on slash.

Fans are divided, with understandably strong emotions, about the plans to revive Blake's 7. In early November 2003, Steve Rogerson met the people behind the new company to hear their plans.

Andrew Sewell and Simon Moorhead do not have horns or tails, nor do they deserve some of the personal abuse - including threats of violence - that fans have been throwing at them over their plans for a new Blake's 7 show and the legal wranglings that have delayed the launch of the DVDs of the original. Yes, they have made mistakes in some things they have done and the way they have done them, and they openly admit that they have at times communicated their viewpoint very badly. And, yes, some of the directions they are planning on going will not make all the fans happy - Andrew's comments on slash will have some seething. But they are both fans of the original show and they genuinely believe that what they are striving for will be a quality show and a fitting tribute to what Terry Nation created.

"We are aware of the fans' attitude and realise with hindsight that we haven't answered their questions in the way that we should have," said Simon, producer at Blake's 7 Enterprises.

Executive producer Andrew added: "People have to realise that we are working on other projects in film and radio, so it is difficult to maintain the level of access the fans would like."

But he promised that as the plans for the new show developed and became more concrete that would change. And he acknowledged that they were partly to blame for the fans having to make judgements on inadequate information.

"We want to clear up the misconceptions," he said.

Both also pointed out that it would make no sense commercially for them to produce something that the fans didn't want.

"We are not doing this through altruism," said Andrew. "This is a commercial world, so we have to produce something to please the audience. The

show is well loved and has endured in the minds of fans. We would be stupid to ignore that."

Simon added: "B7E is a business, but the core of the business is a true belief in what Terry Nation created and how we can move forward."

Getting from there to here

The two were keen, however, to clear up a number of rumours and errors that have clouded fans' judgement about what they are doing. The current road, they said, started four years ago when they had the option to take on some of the rights. They realised to progress the way they wanted they would have to have all the rights. The negotiations over those rights took two years, and the deal was signed in September 2002. They started looking at potential scripts, all of which they rejected for one reason or another.

"They were poor parodies of the original show, pastiches of the original show or just off the mark," said Andrew. "We all agreed - Paul Darrow too - that they were wrong, which is why they were rejected."

It was at this point, said Andrew, that Paul started to become frustrated.

"He thought that, from signing the rights, within six months we should have been in production. The reality is that it could take years."

The next stage was deciding how to pitch the show, whether to look at a UK audience only or aim internationally. They had to look at what elements of the original show should carry over. And they had to look at what format the show should be in - the decision was a mini-series that could work as a pilot for either further mini-series, a proper series or a series of television movies.

Though B7E sees the US market as important, it was not the driver. Andrew believes that, while a

major US network is unlikely to buy what they produce, there will be a chance of selling it to a cable channel. And it is to some of the original American SF shows that Andrew has looked to for inspiration, particularly character-led shows such as Stargate SG-1, Babylon 5 and Buffy.

To write the first script, B7E brought on board Dominic DeVine as executive story editor (see box).

“He knows the show, he likes the show and he is quite a visionary,” said Andrew. “We have worked with him very hard in shaping the mini-series.”

So far, he has produced a 40-page treatment. B7E was happy enough to show it to potential financiers at Mipcon in Cannes in October 2003. Mipcon is the twice-yearly television marketplace. By the time the next one comes around in March 2004, they hope to have a full script and start the serious work of financing the project. On top of the 40 pages, they also have a plot arc to take the show across a number of mini-series.

It is too early to say yet which channel the show might end up on and B7E doesn't even plan to pitch to a channel until they have the script, a budget, a director and key cast members on board.

What the new show will be like

“The show we are looking to make,” said Andrew, “is for the 21st century. The tastes of the audience have changed [since Blake's 7 was first made] so you can't just transform the show from then to here. It has to play to a new audience and we can't be in a situation where viewers need knowledge of the previous show.”

That doesn't mean that the original show is going to be ignored. Both say they bought the rights because they have fond memories of the original and that the new show has to be true to that.

“It will have elements of the original so that those who know will get them,” said Andrew. “We will acknowledge the canon. But we have to look at the complexities of the storytelling out there, and they are dramas that treat the audience in a different way to how they treated the audience 25 years ago.”

The one element that will stay is that the new show will be character-led, and feature characters who the audience can identify with.

“They have to be real,” said Andrew. “That is what Terry Nation did. He created people who were real, who had flaws, were witty and so on. That is the cornerstone of any good drama - it has to have

Who is Dominic DeVine?

(taken from the web)

He is a script writer, script consultant and story editor. One of his scripts - “The Last Horseman” - was optioned in Hollywood with game rights optioned in UK. He was recently head-hunted to write screenplays for two Hollywood \$150m features. He is developing “Voodoo”, a feature comedy, with production scheduled for summer 2004. He is directing two of his own projects - “Unborn”, a psychological horror in summer 2004, and “A Perfect Plan” with Mickey Rourke attached about a year later. He was previously employed as a reader by New Line and Fine Line Features and has been a consultant at various other small companies including Greenlit and Raven Films.

believable characters.”

One big change will be in the nature of the Federation. Gone will be the faceless totalitarian state that was only given a voice through Servalan and Travis. The plan is to give the Federation more depth and character. Out will go the Federation logo - “too 1970s” - to be replaced by a more modern design.

The premise of the show will be depend on conflict - physical, emotional and political.

“The politics are a key component,” he said. “It will be like The Dirty Dozen meets The West Wing. Blake's 7 is not about whiz bang special effects, it has to be character and story-driven. And it has to be distinctive from the competition in the way the original show was different from what was around then.”

Roj Blake and the original crew will be mentioned, but in this world they will be folklore and their history will be manipulated by both sides to suit their aims.

Avon though will appear as the catalyst for what is to happen in the new show. Enter Paul Darrow, or rather exit Paul Darrow. Much has been made over the past few years of Paul recreating the character of Avon - until October this year when Paul announced a very public split from B7E. So where does that leave the character of Avon? Andrew was very clear: “Avon will be recast.”

What was more striking was that Andrew said it was never certain that Paul was going to have the role. “Paul has always known that he might not be

playing Avon. His ability to reprise that role was in some doubt,” said Andrew. “We are now going to recast Avon without doubt.”

The door though isn't closed for Paul to have some input into the show: “We are always willing to talk to Paul,” said Andrew, “but Paul was not the driving force behind the project.”

Paul criticised B7E in his statement for preferring to exploit a brand rather than make a TV movie. Andrew defended his position: “If you have an opportunity to develop something in a broader commercial environment, that is not a bad thing. For something to be commercial, it has to appeal. Blake's 7 is not a brand at the moment, but it could become a brand.”

While a new Avon will probably meet with mixed reactions from the fans, the next piece of news is likely to be almost unanimously welcomed - B7E has opened talks with Chris Boucher, with a view to him being involved in the project in some way. Chris was the script editor on all 52 episodes of the original series and wrote some of the episodes that are among fans' favourites.

“We haven't signed a deal with Chris yet,” said Andrew, “but it is very likely that it will happen.”

Initially, Chris will not be involved in the scripting of the mini-series - Dominic is on board for that - but that has not been ruled out for the future. He is more likely to be involved in the planned animated series and the possibility of some audio adventures that may be out by the end of next year.

“We had a lively meeting with Chris,” said Andrew. “I hold him in the highest regard and we are talking with him over a variety of things. We share a similar view of the show.”

The other character who will be back is Orac, but a very different-looking Orac. Gone will be the large flashing perspex box, but what it will be replaced with is a secret.

Simon admitted he had some doubts about bringing Orac back. “I hate talking computers,” he said. “But Orac is a character.”

As to who will play Orac, Andrew said: “I'd love to have Peter Tuddenham involved, but it is too early. First we have to put the money together.”

A concept artist has been hired to deliver a general look for the show. Andrew was unwilling to say more than that he had Hollywood experience and would give the show a distinctive look.

Future writers

Since Blake's 7 died in the early 1980s, it has been kept alive by fans writing their own stories, and many are wondering whether the new show will provide an opportunity to give their hobby a more professional footing.

“I tend not to like cold submissions,” said Andrew, “because you get inundated. We have other writers in the picture for future scripts. But there are other projects where there will be opportunities for unsolicited scripts.”

This includes the possibility of spin-off novels, the audio shows mentioned earlier and the animated series. He doesn't, however, want a repeat of the radio shows that the BBC produced, which he said “didn't ring true”. He wouldn't say who would be producing the new audio plays, but he did say it wouldn't be Big Finish and hinted that he might do it himself.

As to other writers, he said: “There is a lot of untapped talent out there and we would like to tap some of it.”

Generally, he said, the aim was to have a team of writers. And he said all the writers would have the tapes of the original show.

Looking back at the original series

Andrew has watched every episode of the original show, when asked how many times he said “too many”. Simon watched about three-quarters of the original when it was first broadcast and has read all the original scripts, which he thinks are better than the episodes as broadcast. His favourite episodes are the first and last - The Way Back and Blake.

“When I read the Terry Nation and Chris Boucher stuff, sometimes it is disappointing to watch the episodes,” said Simon. “You see all the imperfections that happened because of budget and time.”

Andrew also named The Way Back as one of his two favourite episodes - the other being Gambit, mainly because of the interactions between Avon and Vila.

On The Way Back, Andrew said: “It was an incredibly courageous piece of SF drama trying to capture a pre-watershed audience and be adult. They even had the lead character up for child molesting.”

He said he liked the way the show always surprised, but he thought it lost its way in the fourth season, though he too liked the last episode because

it showed it still had the capacity to shock.

The web site and fannish things

After B7E invited fans to its new web site and to participate in the online forum, many took the plunge. Those fans were justifiably upset when the said forum was closed without notice. While some found their way to other forums, such as the one on this site, others didn't, leaving conversations unfinished and new friends lost in the ether. So why did they take that action?

"We put the forum in so people could discuss things," said Andrew, "but it got hijacked and became a bitching ground. Criticism is great as long as it is constructive, and it wasn't. We had potential investors looking at the site and the forum did not paint a healthy picture. It wasn't that people were criticising, it was the way they were criticising."

Doing this without notice, they claim, was initially accidental. They had been thinking of taking it down, and then it crashed and they decided not to put it back up again. Andrew admits that the notice they eventually put up should have gone up earlier and he said they did answer about 50 emails enquiring about the forum.

Asked why he was not willing at least to put a link to the forum on this site, he said that the same criticisms had continued there.

"I am not going to sanction a site that is slanderous," he said.

He knows what they did ended up letting a minority spoil the situation for the majority of forum users, but he felt he had no choice.

Generally, he knows there are problems with the site and there are plans to sort some of those problems out in the next few weeks. However, he does plan on keeping it as a site aimed at broadband users because he said that was what all the serious movie sites did.

"By the time we are ready to expand the site, the number of people with broadband access will be huge," he said.

Given his views on the forum here, a number of people will now be wondering about his thoughts on the large number of Blake's 7 web sites, as well as all the zines and fan fiction.

"I think it is great that people are enthusiastic about a show and want to celebrate it," he said. "I am however against unofficial merchandise because it cheapens the product. I am also against so-called slash fiction and I give everyone fair warning that I do not support it."

Slash fiction is fan fiction in which some of the characters have a homosexual relationship - or a hint of one. This can range from something very mild that would probably get a U certificate if it was broadcast to some that is extremely graphic. See box for more on Andrew's views on this.

The DVDs

Out of all that has happened, the one thing that has got the fans angrier than anything else is the way they see B7E as delaying the release of the DVDs with the extras and Kevin Davies' much-wanted documentary. The news on that front is still not good, but first Andrew explained the history.

Andrew Sewell on slash

Andrew's statement that he is against slash will probably anger many fans and delight many others. This is what he said:

"I think slash is distasteful. The actors that are represented do not appreciate it. And some produce this stuff on the web. I think it is bad taste. It has no reflection or bearing on what the show is and it is not a tribute to Terry Nation's legacy. I think it is an abomination. I think what is an abomination is the pornography. I have no problem with fan fiction, but I do have a problem with pornography."

Asked what he planned to do, he said: "They will find out how I am going to clamp down on it. The moment you start doing something of an extremely dubious nature of the pornographic variety or for a commercial benefit without acquiring the rights, I and my partners will take a dim view of that."

He acknowledged that slash would always go on. "If it is conducted in the privacy of your own homes, then we can't stop that. But when it is on the web, it is inappropriate. I will try to minimise it further than it already is. I won't have that representation of Terry Nation's characters given official sanction. Kids like Blake's 7 and I think it is inappropriate that they should come across that material under the guise of a celebration of Blake's 7. There are no gate keepers for some of this stuff, and that concerns me."

“Fabulous Films originally approached us about this two years ago,” he said. “It is a myth that we came in late and decided to upset the apple cart. Fab Films had the non-exclusive videogram rights, which didn’t in our view extend to a DVD. It is more than just the interactive issue. They had the rights to release it in a linear fashion.”

The DVD that is now being delayed is a joint venture between Fab Films and BBC Worldwide.

“The powers that be decided to proceed with the project without talking to or getting the permission from B7E and the Nation estate. Now there are ongoing complex negotiations. It is not just about money. If you buy the rights to something, you just don’t let someone go and piss on you.”

He said one of the initial demands was for a fair and equitable commercial deal, and that side he said had been largely resolved. He said it was the reputation of Blake’s 7 that was now the concern.

“They tried to ride roughshod over us and produce something with content which we did not feel had any quality or was anything new,” he said.

Simon added: “When we sat down in 2001, we talked about the 25th anniversary and making something special. The concept was to produce a tribute to Terry Nation. What they have done is not a trib-

ute to Terry Nation.”

Andrew said that BBC Worldwide and Fabulous Films have known for 18 months that they did not have the rights to do it in the way they were doing it. “Yet for the past 12 months they have let slip release dates and they knew they were not realistic.”

As for the future, Andrew said he wanted the DVD to be “the strongest possible representation of Blake’s 7. I don’t want exploitative trash out there. They will eventually be out, but Kevin Davies’ documentary will not be on them. I will not discuss my criticism of it publicly because that would be insulting to Kevin, but it doesn’t hit the mark.”

He said that 18 months ago there was the opportunity to produce a documentary that would have been fresh with material in it that no-one but the Nation estate had access to, “and that would have been a real tribute to Terry Nation”.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Harriet Monkhouse and to Louise and Simon for hosting this interview on their site.

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