



Phil Redmond Talking

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Phil Redmond in conversation with **Tony Bradman** about **Grange Hill**, television and lots beside.

A new series of **Grange Hill** starts this month.

Tucker and Co, five original Grange Hill short stories, is published in February.

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Going Out, a six part series from Southern TV about a bunch of sixteen-year-old school leavers, was much discussed - for lots of reasons - when it appeared at the end of last year.

The creator of all three is **Phil Redmond**, who talks here to **Tony Bradman**.

TB Let's start with the most obvious question. How did you become a writer?

PR I was never a childhood scribbler. I was never up in my room writing short stories or anything like that. I got into writing seriously because I used to be a quantity surveyor and I hated it. One day I was so cheesed off I came home and said to the Mrs I wanted to go on the dole to see if I could become a writer and...

TB What was her reaction to that?

PR The only bit of writing I'd done previously was comedy sketches which I'd sent to people like Mike and Bernie Winters and Harry Secombe. I sold about five in five years or something. It was nothing great but it was the only other thing I had ever done. Her view was that I was so miserable as a quantity surveyor there was no point in carrying on. So I signed on the dole and gave myself six months. Nothing happened, so I gave myself another three months and then the Thursday before the Monday when I was going to go and start another job as a quantity surveyor I got a commission from London Weekend to do one of the **Doctor in Charge** series. That was just the result of writing off and phoning and pestering the producer. I pushed in other ideas and outlines for him and he commissioned another and I thought well, this is it.

From there I did a kids' series for ATV called **The Kids from 47A**, and I was just beginning to get along when the Arab-Israeli war happened in 1973 and the industry closed down. It was last in - first out for me. A good time I thought to get rid of my working class chip about not having a university education and having missed out in some way. So I went to Liverpool University to do a Social Studies degree; it was the one subject I felt included things which would help me in my career. Coming from a working-class background writing, for me, was a way out.

TB Was yours an ordinary working class background?

PR Oh yeah, yeah. I wasn't one of the *really* deprived. I lived on a council estate - Huyton - one frontier town, and I went to school in another frontier town, Kirby. I passed the 11 plus and I was supposed to go to one of the Catholic

grammar schools; but it was 1960, the dawn of the great new Jerusalem, and Comprehensive was the thing; so I was bussed 12 miles into Kirby to the biggest Roman Catholic Comprehensive school in Britain. I know now we were guinea pigs, the grammar school intake. It was just a social experiment. At the end of seven years I came out with four O Levels and one A Level, and I felt bitter and resentful because I knew I had the ability to get ten O levels and five A levels. Looking back, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I believe totally in the comprehensive system; not in the sense that it provides a good education because I don't think any of our educational structures provide a good education, but because it's all about meeting other sections of society. That's why I'm all for it. I think any kind of restricted school, of whatever type - single sex, single social group, single intellectual ability - is bad; it's wrong because it gives kids a totally false view of society.

TB You've obviously thought a lot about education and schools.

PR I suppose it started when I went back into it to do my degree - the sociology of education was part of the course. But what I've seen in secondary schools lately through Grange Hill has confirmed it. It's almost like the Final Solution - selecting the ones who are going to survive and the ones who aren't. Schools don't give kids the credit for the intelligence they all start with. It's just about sticking labels on them and encouraging them to stick labels on themselves. Kids are often classed as idiots, or the teacher doesn't like them, so they start to think they are no good. By the time they are 13 or 14 they've given up. It's sad; it's really depressing.

TB Why is it like that?

PR It's all to do with those magic bits of paper you've got to have. Even the most mundane jobs are demanding more and more paper qualifications.

TB My Dad was saying the other day you practically needed a degree to clean the toilet.

PR I say it a little bit more profoundly than that (said with a smile) in **Going Out**, when one of the characters says you've got to have O levels to wipe your arse.

TB Are you more interested in the kids that fall by the wayside?

PR I suppose I am. Some are survivors; for others it's more difficult. When I was on the dole I was fortunate enough to be able to argue with officials on their own level and was able to get out of the system what I was supposed to get out of it - and probably a bit more. But I remember going to sign on and standing in the queue behind kids of 16 or 17, straight out of school. They could hardly write, hardly sign their name on the form. It would take them a good two minutes and all the time they're getting aggro. You know, 'What are you doing? Are you thick or something?' And the people who are saying that are supposed to be helping them to get a job and explaining the system to them.

TB How does all that translate into writing **Grange Hill** and **Going Out**?

PR Well, as you get into TV you realise that it's the most powerful form of communication we've got. If you want to say something about society TV is the place to do it. That's what motivates me to write. **Grange Hill** deals with real issues like the shortage of resources; it looks at personal relationships, it looks at the things that aren't talked about much like bullying and the physical abuse teachers hand out to kids. I wanted to write a series which people from my sort of background could identify with and I knew that if I could get it on the screen it would be successful. The original idea was to go from Year One to Year Seven: but as we got to the third year we started to get into sex and drugs and rock and roll, and of course on children's television that's death! So we tend now to concentrate on the 11-13 age group. But the bulk of our audience ranges from 5-18. Obviously the core of the audience is 11-13, and they identify with it exactly. I suppose the older kids look at it as a kind of nostalgia, and the younger ones just like seeing what the big kids do.

TB When you sat down to write **Grange Hill** did you see it as filling a gap?

PR Yes, that was the main motivation. When I was at school we had **Ivanhoe** and **Robin Hood** and all that sort of stuff. That or Enid Blyton. There was no growing up or being beaten up on your way home from school. There were no books or TV programmes about families going through divorces or kids being taunted because they didn't have enough money to buy the proper school uniform. Everybody on television seemed to have tremendous amounts of money. They were always well dressed; they always lived in the country; they played around with horses, captured atomic spies, saved the universe. And it was all great stuff. But I'd never seen any of that going on on a council estate. So that's why I wanted to do **Grange Hill**. I wanted to deal with reality.

TB That all sounds very gloomy and intense. But **Grange Hill** isn't like that.

PR No, you're right. **Grange Hill** is entertainment. It's got a tremendous comedy strain through it because life has. That's where people who try to imitate it miss the point. They say we are going to make this new series. It's going to be tough and hard and gritty. And when it's done it's all on one level. Forget it! No-one goes around in a permanent state of aggravation or depression; even when you're having a confrontation with someone there is always humour in it.

TB Do you think ITV can produce a rival to **Grange Hill**?

PR To make any inroads into **Grange Hill** now they'd need to do something with a lot of episodes, and no ITV company has got the money for that. They're in a cleft stick. They want the success but they are frightened of the risk. They are also frightened of controversy, frightened Mary Whitehouse is going to be offended. So the great conspiracy goes on. Television is run and operated by people who make 'nice' programmes. They don't want all the aggravation that goes with being controversial. Everyone tells me **Going Out** is a great programme for adolescents; but no-one is interested in making another series.

TB How did **Going Out** come to be written?

PR The initial thought was to make a British **Happy Days**. I said if I do anything I'll do a British **Saturday Night Fever** without the music. And they said 'Yeah, yeah!' though at the time I don't think they'd even seen **Saturday Night Fever**; they just thought it was a really cool move.

TB Did you encounter much opposition to the sort of programme you wanted to make?

PR We got great support from Lewis Rudd at Southern and once we got into the project they committed themselves to it totally. But there were a few dodgy moments early on about the language. When the scripts came in they said, 'We can't make this, it's absolutely disgusting. I think it's because a swear word written on the page looks out of place. If you see 'piss off' written down you immediately think of the hardest connotations of it. But when it's spoken it can be quite gentle. The scripts were going round Southern in brown paper envelopes. all well-thumbed and well read but all 'vile and disgusting.' Then when we were into cutting and editing everyone started saying, 'These are the best things we've ever made,' and they really got behind us.

TB You had other problems too, didn't you?

PR We started in 1980 and we were supposed to make 13 programmes. But then the TV strike came along and we had a choice of waiting till 1981 to make the 13 or making six then. Knowing TV, we chose to make the six. As it turned out if we hadn't done that we wouldn't have made any.

TB And after all that there was the fight to get it on the network.

PR Yes. I said 10.30 was the time to put it on. It's the ideal time for adolescent programmes. They sit down after coming in off the street or coming back from whatever they have been doing, having a last cup of coffee before going off to bed. That's when they watch the football, that's when they watch **Soap** and **The Old Grey Whistle Test**, that's when they listen to John Peel. But yer TV makers (he makes beeping computer noises) can't think like that. They put 'adolescent programmes' between six and seven: after 'children' and before 'grown-ups'! As it turned out Southern lost

the franchise and **Going Out** had to be transmitted before December 31st. So we ended up being offered late night spots all over the place: different times, different days, different weeks on each station.

TB How did you feel about that?

PR It's really frustrating. The industry is saying the big growth area is 16-24 year olds. Report after report says there should be more programmes for that age group. We make what we think is the best programme so far for them and it's being shown at midnight. The IBA had a seminar and they said **Going Out** was the sort of programme that should be made. Then the programmers say it has to be on late because of the bad language and the sex. It just doesn't make sense, and the hypocrisy of it all makes me sick. Some critics were sympathetic and pointed all that out when it was broadcast. Where it did get shown at 10.30 it did well. On ATV it got a really good rating, a 23% share of all homes. They get 23% for **Worzel Gummidge** on Saturday afternoons.

TB Does the writing come from memory? Or do you do research in schools?

PR Yes it does come from memory, memory and observation. I don't really do research, but at the end of every year I try to go to schools to ask them what they liked or didn't like about **Grange Hill**, and what they want to see. That's to keep the reality of it, and I also like to pick up the bits of current slang and stuff. But it's really about just keeping your eyes open in the street, being perceptive, observing what's going on around you. You just assimilate it all. Something I read once said all writers are like sponges, they just soak things up. With any piece of writing you create characters, you put them in a situation and then you just project what they will do.

TB Did you always think about being a TV writer when you started out?

PR Yeah, oh yeah. I'm not a literary writer. TV is my medium. You can reach millions through TV. I'm trying to increase awareness of problems in society. But I don't go in for very profound statements; that gets really boring. I like to think I write stuff my mum and dad could watch and understand and get something from. And I don't think I'm making a revolution: changing society is an evolutionary process. Someone does something on TV, then someone else builds on it, and in five years, maybe, something has changed. It's a slow process.

TB While you are waiting, what gives you the biggest kick in all your success?

PR It's knowing that at five o'clock on Tuesdays and Fridays for a good chunk of the year twelve million people are concentrating on something that I've created. That gives me a great buzz.

Tucker and Co

A collection of five original short stories by Phil Redmond featuring old and new Grange Hill characters.

Fontana Lions, 0 00 672017 X, 85p

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