

Creator and writer of **BIG BOYS**
Nominated for scripted comedy
and memorable moment

JACK ROOKE, DOUBLE Bafta-winning comedy writer, has a confession. "I actually don't like writing," he laughs. "I find it really boring and time-consuming. I find other writers all really awkward and anxious and full of neuroses. I'm a stand-up comedian! I would way rather be at the Edinburgh Fringe performing in a tiny hovel, sharing a dressing room with 12 drag queens, than I would in a writer's room. It's not my vibe."

It must be a burden to be so good at something you hate. The 32-year-old has already won two Bafta Craft Awards for writing *Big Boys*, Rooke's tongue-in-cheek riff on his own university days, starring Dylan Llewellyn as the younger "Jack" alongside Jon Pointing as best mate Danny.

Now, at this year's Television Awards, *Big Boys* is nominated for best comedy, alongside Pointing for actor in a comedy. And a scene they appeared in together – where Rooke plays a version of himself, talking back through time to Pointing's character – is the only scripted comedy nominated in the "memorable moment" category. All in all it's a long way from the series' inauspicious origins.

"When I was first writing *Big Boys*, the show had been with previous broadcasters. They turned it down. The show had been cancelled twice!" Rooke recalls. "We got cancelled when we made a pilot and then we took it to someone else, then Covid happened and we were cancelled again."

"We made that show on the smallest possible budgets. Series one was half-funded by the Young Audiences Content Fund through the BFI, so we almost didn't make it. Nobody ever really wanted to fully commit to *Big Boys*. Thankfully Fiona McDermott, when she was at Channel 4, said, 'I love this show. I think it should be a unique comedy, but also a family comedy.'"

"I think the 14 nominations we've had over three series is pretty good. I could die happy with that."

In his Bafta Craft winner's speech last month, Rooke spoke passionately about the need to invest in comedy early, and the class barrier that means some people never have a chance to take their first steps into the industry. "It's really challenging to make comedy in the UK at the moment," he explains. "I think it's because it's devalued constantly against drama, and gets less spend than drama, especially at the public service broadcaster level. It gets way less marketing."

"You look at shows like *Gavin & Stacey* and at writers like Michaela Coel or Phoebe Waller-Bridge or Jesse Armstrong, all of whom stem from scripted comedy. And we just aren't giving anyone the right setup to launch their career in the same way."

A big issue, he explains, is that more

Jack Rooke

"regional" or specific comedies – he cites *Alma's Not Normal*, *Smoggie Queens*, *Juice*, *The Change* and *Things You Should Have Done* – are harder to sell to America, which means they can't secure the same investment as more universal stories.

"International investment means you've got bigger budgets, which means bigger names and better marketing," he says. "It ends up meaning that way more privileged stories get told than stuff that feels very specific to this weird little island."

ON OR OFF his keyboard, Rooke is a funny man. Believe it or not, that's not a prerequisite for comedy writers, and given his campaigning mien and the themes of his work (which has covered grief and suicide), you might expect him to be more earnest than he is. Instead, he spends our shoot riffing with Pointing and sending himself up, comparing his work unfavourably to older comedies like *Only Fools and Horses*.

"I just don't think that anything will ever be as funny as the bar fall," he says. "That and when the Vicar of Dibley drops in the puddle. To me, as a child, that's comedy. Less of this *Big Boys*-y male mental health stuff. I'm bored of that. Put some slapstick in. Let's get some people falling over. Let's get some people injuring themselves in a permanent way."

He laughs, warming to his theme. "I'm bored of mental health shows. There you go. We're sick of them now. Just get a therapist and take some vitamin D, get outside and have a walk. All right?"

Next up for Rooke is a stint writing on David Nicholls' *Adrian Mole* adaptation, and a planned return to stand-up. But could there ever be another return for *Big Boys*?

"I'm really proud that we ended it with series three, and it was always going to be a three-season arc, because you have three years of uni," he says firmly. "Sometimes, you have to end on a high – like with these Bafta nominations."

But he does also have one final confession. He admits, "Sometimes, I think, 'If I was doing season four... I actually think I'm a better writer now than I was then.'" Albeit, of course, a reluctant one. **HUW FULLERTON**

Big Boys is available on C4 streaming

"I actually don't like writing – I find it really boring and time-consuming"

JACK ROOKE

Jon Pointing

Star of **BIG BOYS**
Nominated for actor in a comedy

Jack wrote this character for you, Jon – does that give you more leeway to tinker with the script? I think with this show in particular, Jack wanted me to do it because he saw something in me that he knew worked for this part, for Danny. So I sort of took that as licence to bring something to the role. That said, you can get carried away by the improvising. You're so keen to make people laugh in the room that it sort of takes away from what the scene is doing. You've also been in hit comedy *Small Prophets* recently – how different is a *Mackenzie Crook*

script to a Jack Rooke one? Crook or Rooke? That's the question. The pace is different – with something like *Big Boys*, you're charging through the years with this group of people. With *Small Prophets*, it's more like Mackenzie is trying to slow the world down a little bit. What's your favourite classic sitcom quote? From *Peep Show*... I probably say "That's my bit of lager" the most. Or the other one I say from *The Royle Family* quite a lot is, "Bye bye, baby David." But I quote *Peep Show* the most because it works for so many scenarios. HF

Lucia Keskin

Creator, writer and star of **THINGS YOU SHOULD HAVE DONE** Nominated for scripted comedy

From YouTube sensation to Bafta nomination, yours has been quite the journey. How are you enjoying it?

I never go out and I've never done anything like this before, so it's fine. Plus I've just started new ADHD medication.

And how is that?

I don't feel any different yet as it takes ages to get on the right dose, but it's the road to focusing. I really struggle with it – it takes me ages to get anything written down.

We hear a lot about younger generations being horrified by the political incorrectness of old comedies like the *Carry On* films. What do you think of them?

I watch loads of old comedies like *Carry On*... and *Hancock's Half Hour*. And unless something's incredibly offensive to the point where it's not funny, it doesn't bother me. I enjoy a very dark humour, though. I love *Nighty Night* and I did really enjoy *After Life*. **GARETH McLEAN**

Things You Should Have Done is available on iPlayer

Bafta
Comedy
Special

'I watch loads of old comedies like *Carry On* and *Hancock*'

LUCIA KESKIN

LUCIA WEARS BLACK SUIT, GRESHAM BLAKE; SHIRT, THE SHIRT COMPANY; TIE, GRESHAM BLAKE; BROOCH, PRESENTPERFECTCREATIONS.COM

JACK WEARS BLAZER AND TROUSERS BOTH JACAMO; SHIRT, HARVIE & HUDSON; SHOES, BASE LONDON; TIE, VIVIENNE WESTWOOD
JON WEARS BTUX BLAZER, HARVIE & HUDSON; TROUSERS, NEXT; SHIRT, HARVIE & HUDSON; SHOES, JONES THE BOOKMAKER; TIE, VIVIENNE WESTWOOD