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## ROYAL ASCENT

Chronicling the reign of Left Bank and Netflix series, *The Crown*

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# ROYAL ASCENT

## THE CREATION OF THE CROWN



The six seasons of Netflix' *The Crown* have been emblematic of the UK's international success on the drama stage. Over the next eight pages, Michael Burns asks its creators about its long reign. First up, execs **Andy Harries** and **Suzanne Mackie**, director of production **Hilary Benson**, and director **Christian Schwochow**

### THE CORONATION

According to Andy Harries, chief exec and co-founder of Left Bank, and a close friend of Morgan, the bones of *The Crown* were formed through Morgan's "absolute fascination" with the weekly private meetings between the Queen and the Prime Minister. Initially explored in Morgan's 2013 stage play *The Audience*, he developed the concept into a six-series TV saga, focusing on three distinct periods of Queen Elizabeth II's reign, each with a new cast.

"Obviously, as a producer, it was very challenging – six series at 10 hours, that's 60 hours of television. How was I going to sell that?" recalls Harries. "We knew we needed a broadcaster with very deep pockets and a real belief in what we were doing."

With UK broadcasters keen but unwilling to stump up the budget Harries thought *The Crown* required, exploratory meetings with US studios followed.

"The first four were a dud. Netflix was the final meeting, and by this time I was quite concerned," recalls Harries. "[Netflix chief content officer] Ted Sarandos, Cindy Holland and a couple of other executives were in the room. Peter had written a pilot script and pitched extremely well, but we could see we were pitching to an open door. Almost straight away, Sarandos said, "This is great, we want it".

Unknown to Left Bank, Netflix was planning its global expansion. "*The Crown* was a perfect piece of IP to do that," says Harries. "They'd run the algorithms on it before we walked in through the door."

Negotiations led to substantial backing from Netflix. "It was around the five million an hour mark, which at that time was really good," reveals Harries. "It allowed Peter to write expansively, allowed us to think big, and allowed us to get the very best directors around."

### INTO PRODUCTION

Director of Production Hilary Benson produced the first budget that Netflix saw. "Valentine's Day 2014: the date of that budget is seared on my soul," she says. It kicked off a year of pre-production to address logistical challenges, including navigating the uncharted territory of shooting in 4K for TV and international reversioning.

"I had an archives producer from day one of pre-prep because producers wanted to see archive of a thousand things," says Benson. "That became a full-time job."

Benson recalls wondering if Netflix would request *The Crown* be shot on film. "That frightened me," she says. "We'd worked out there was not enough 35mm film in the UK then to do six seasons, if

we were lucky enough to get there."

To optimise resources, South Africa served as a stand-in for various global locations. A couple of stages at Elstree were booked out, where sets stood in for the back of Downing Street, downstairs at Buckingham Palace, and aeroplane interiors. But the palatial rooms had to be shot in stately homes unconnected with the royals.

"To build a set of rooms in Buckingham Palace would be huge, you have to go somewhere and film that," says Benson. "We also took the backlot for a long time. We thought we'd build the London streets there at first, but we couldn't work out how we would recreate driving in 1950s London."

Benson's team would look at scripts as they came through, using them to plan the production. "We took on Martin Harrison very early because I knew that I would need a year of scheduling work as the scripts evolved,"

says Benson. "We took on Andrew Eaton as line producer quite early, as well as Martin Childs as production designer and Pat Karam as location manager."

"Having a proper budget means that if we were going to do it, we'd

"OBVIOUSLY, AS A PRODUCER, IT WAS VERY CHALLENGING – SIX SERIES AT 10 HOURS, THAT'S 60 HOURS OF TELEVISION. HOW WAS I GOING TO SELL THAT?"

ANDY HARRIES  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, LEFT BANK







do it properly," says Harries. "We had enormously bright kids from Oxbridge brought into our research department. The work that was done on these scripts was extraordinary."

**STORY CIRCLE**

Executive Producer Suzanne Mackie says Morgan had the six-season architecture mapped out; it rarely deviated from the initial vision. "He even knew which seasons might be the more challenging ones," she recalls. "When Peter's in a story, he shares his thinking with you almost minute by minute. So as a creative producer, I had to be there to respond, along with two or three others. I was privy to what he was thinking. I could see how a scene was constructed in minute detail."

Mackie's team would gather at Morgan's house to read the scripts aloud. "None of us are actors, but it brought it alive," says Mackie. "It always threw up something that was not working or showed that the focus was off. I found that so valuable."

For example, Mackie points to S3:E1 where an interesting pre-title sequence featuring spies and a poisoning was

scrapped. "We were trying to say something about the paranoid state of the country, but we'd gone too far away from the Queen, too far away from the royal family. As much as one was tempted to tell the story of Great Britain at that moment, you must do it via them, otherwise you lose the reason for it being in *The Crown*."

"Peter is so smart and so politically motivated that he would always, in the end, find a way of doing it with a light touch, but it would always be via the institution, via her, and then weirdly that became sometimes more profound. You're constantly getting layers of complexity with his portrayals of those people and historical moments."

**"WHEN PETER'S IN A STORY, HE SHARES HIS THINKING WITH YOU ALMOST MINUTE BY MINUTE. SO AS A CREATIVE PRODUCER, I HAD TO BE THERE TO RESPOND"**

**SUZANNE MACKIE  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

An example of how episodes were crafted is *Moon dust* (S3:Ep7). Through the script discussions, a story about the 1969 moon landing and astronauts visiting Buckingham Palace evolved to cover a midlife

crisis for Prince Philip, with the Queen subtly bringing him back down to earth.

"That's a precise example of the journey of a story in terms of how you have to shift it, move it around to find how the two marry," says Mackie. "We

so often had an A story and a B story, but the two have to speak to each other and have to join somehow."

**CINEMATIC SCOPE**

Harries says the first two episodes "set the scene" for *The Crown*. "Stephen Daldry brought enormous class to it. He's an enormously sensitive and sweeping director, great on scale and emotion. It was making TV with a film sensibility."

Mackie, "very much at the heart of casting", also helped choose the directors. International directors were sought to bring in diverse perspectives, including Christian Schwochow from Berlin, who contributed to seasons three, five, and six.

"Peter Morgan is a theatre man, his writing is very precise," says Schwochow. "However, it gives the director and the actors lots of opportunities to explore different layers that are between the lines. I met the cast as early as possible and rehearsed as much as I could. I invited the actors to personally connect with the characters and we tried to explore together how they could have felt in certain situations."

"Coming from East Germany I really cherish and value the personal freedom I now have every single day," he continues. "The young Elizabeth, who became the most privileged person, lost all of that in one day. I found the ambivalence in her character amazing. That was always my approach on *The Crown*, that every single member of the royal family has these feelings."

Schwochow's mantra was "acting and performance first, image second". This might mean starting with a close-up rather than with a big cinematic shot. "On every scene, I decided who from the cast had the hardest task, and if it's an emotional scene," he says. "I always tried to communicate with the actors to see what they needed and arranged the image and the coverage after having that conversation."

It must be challenging to balance historical facts with emotional storytelling for a TV drama, but Schwochow stresses that the most important foundation is the script. He tried to find that balance "in every single scene".

"I'd do different versions of each scene," he says. "We'd try to find the humour, the drama, the emotion, then I would always try and look for a version that was less emotional or more mysterious. We would bring all that material to the cutting room to find those balances."

"We made sure there was always time in the cutting room because something not apparent on the page can become apparent [during the edit]," says Mackie. "It's the last stage of the process, but you can suddenly see that's not the story. You watch it back and a new proposition is there. Then you have to be nimble."

**PAST THE POST**

With seasons mapped out, delivery dates were fixed. "Obviously if you don't lock on time, as each episode flies down the post chain, you start to have a domino effect happening," says Benson. "We were very lucky to have a

brilliant post producer in Nikki Mosely.

"We had a really good team who understood that the money needed to go onto the screen, but we also had a very long-running show," she continues. "In terms of cast, we usually had 176 to 200 parts, but some may only be speaking once. It was a two-week shoot initially but as the seasons grew, it became a longer shoot with more units. Instead of going to one foreign country, you're going to two or three.

You're having to recce and prep foreign territories as well as the UK. And suddenly instead of one main unit and a second unit, you've got two full-time main units in effect. Crew sizes expanded by at least a third

by the end. It just grew exponentially."

As the final series of *The Crown* airs, perhaps the golden age of high-end TV drama is also coming to an end.

"I'm not sure *The Crown* would get made now," says Harries. "[The industry] is in a sort of downturn now and even with the ambition and excitement of someone like Netflix 10 years ago, it would be harder now to arrive and say we're going to do a whole chunk of British

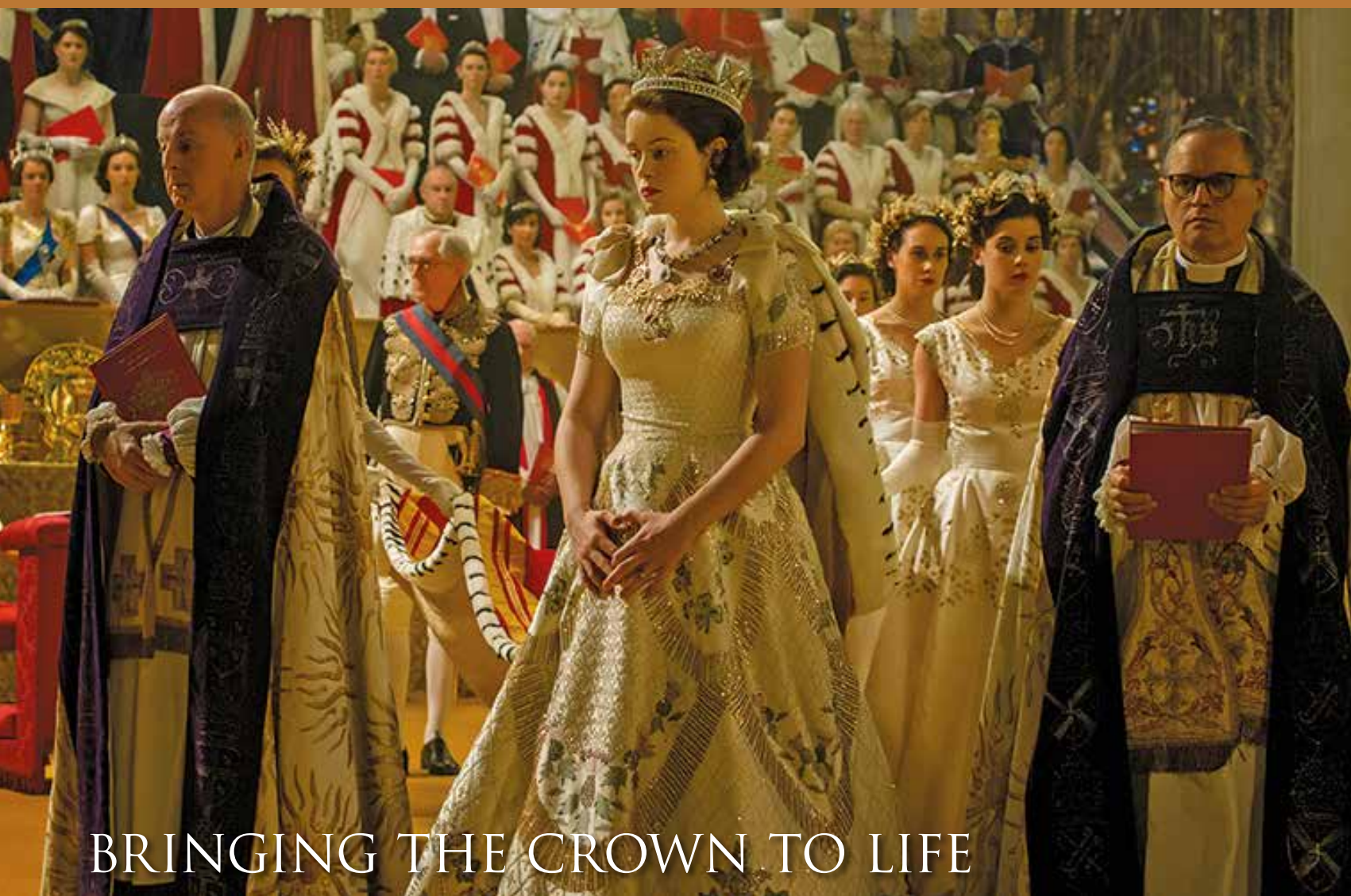
history in 60 hours. It has been a Rolls Royce experience with Netflix. And I do think they are the only people who could have made it. The show is a product of its moment in time and of Netflix's moment too."

**"PETER MORGAN IS A THEATRE MAN, HIS WRITING IS VERY PRECISE. HOWEVER, IT GIVES THE DIRECTOR AND THE ACTORS LOTS OF OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE DIFFERENT LAYERS"**

**CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW  
DIRECTOR**







## BRINGING THE CROWN TO LIFE

The world of *The Crown* was devised by Peter Morgan, but it was brought to life by an army of collaborative creative visionaries. *Telesvisual* talked to four whose work spanned all six seasons: Series production designer **Martin Childs**, series colourist **Asa Shoul**, principal cinematographer **Adriano Goldman**, and series VFX supervisor **Ben Turner**

### FRAMING THE STORY

"I always say that the brief is there in Peter Morgan's scripts," says Martin Childs. "I was trusted to create a space in which these extraordinary events and conversations can happen. With input from directors Stephen Daldry, Philip Martin, Julian Jarrold, and Ben Caron, my team and I were able to create a world which was established by the time more directors joined us for Season Two. By then we had shown that, with the right resources and the right art department we

could take on some ambitious sets outside what might be expected of a royal drama."

Childs' design in 2014 for the private suite of rooms in Buckingham Palace was still being used with great dramatic effect nine years later. "It's there in Episode 1 and it's there in Episode 60, and just possibly every one of the other fifty-eight," he says. But he says the biggest challenge was scale.

"I was faced with Buckingham Palace being made up of a huge composite set on Elstree's biggest stage, a backlot

comprising the exterior, gates and courtyard of Buckingham Palace and, in the end, fifteen different locations, all physically unconnected."

"Everything else that you see, the other nearly four walls of the courtyard and the rest of the façade has all been computer generated," says Ben Turner. "Martin provided fantastic sets to build from and was an absolute dream to work with."

"The Royal Yacht Britannia was three sets in South Africa, two locations in London, another in Scotland, two sets on the backlot, and four sets over two stages at Elstree Studios," adds Childs. "To keep all those spaces feeling like they're connected with some level of narrative logic was quite an achievement but, as often happens with things you're

proudest of, no one in the audience will notice, and that's the point."

VFX was also intended to be largely invisible, but as well as countless set extensions there was face replacement, employing diverse techniques like digital scans, element shoots, and even deep fake faces, for Prince Charles playing polo, Prince Philip driving carriages, and Princess Anne while show jumping.

### GETTING THE LOOK

Goldman shot 28 episodes, including the first two and the very last. Initially, he opted for a grounded and sombre approach that focused on the post-war era's struggles rather than the privileges of royalty.

"There are no fake backlights to make it glossier and more appealing," says Goldman. "We still wanted to make it look beautiful and to light faces the most beautiful way, but there's a strong realistic approach. I think that that stayed with us throughout six seasons."

"Adriano and Stephen [Daldry] said that they didn't want it to look like another famous period series of the day, by which they meant overly bright," says Shoul.

"We had to strike a balance while at the same time grasping the opportunity for things to change historically, to brighten up over the course of the story, adding colour and extravagance over time," says Childs. "We would sometimes

choose colours and set dressing around a costume, sometimes the other way around. For Margaret's reunion with Peter Townsend, for example, Amy Roberts' fabulous fuchsia pink dress for Margaret led the way. For Kelly Fisher's apartment, when she was on the phone to Dodi, the lilac décor led the way."

"As with all the projects I work on I started researching photography and film of the time we would be trying to emulate: how were rooms lit? What colour temperature were the streetlights? How saturated or pastel were the different fabrics of the day?" says Shoul.

"During testing on costume and makeup, we tested lipstick colours in particular as the original shades all leaned towards magenta

when we applied a cool grade.

"Adriano wanted to feel the age of the story and desired a look where, if people were away from windows and other light sources, they would fall into darkness," he continues. "We called this approach 'putting people in the room' and used it for the first four series, often using shapes to darken ceilings and corners of the frame. Older, softer lenses lent themselves to that look as we didn't want a super crisp feel."

As well as adhering to the Netflix 4K workflow, Goldman planned to change camera technology every two seasons to coincide with the cast changes. "Seasons one and two were shot on Sony F55 and vintage Cooke Speed Panchros," he recalls. "For seasons three and four, we shot on ZEISS Super Speeds, still vintage in a way because they are lenses from the 70s and 80s. When the Sony Venice came out, we shot season four with the new camera but changed to Cooke S4 lenses for seasons five and six."

"Adriano suggested to all the other DPs that each time we visited the Queen's audience room it should be lit and shot slightly differently so that it never felt stale and had something new to draw the eye to," says Shoul.

Other principles guided the overall cinematography. "No close-ups on wide-angle lenses - close-ups are supposed to be flattering," says Goldman. "No strange, low angles on our lead characters, or any camera move that doesn't have a justification. It's about delivering a believable performance within a believable

environment."

Steadicam was often deployed "on Dolly mode", so-called as it travelled on a straight or a parallel line. "It's not supposed to be seen as a Steadicam shot, it always had to be very elegant and stable," Goldman explains. "Throughout six seasons, we did a couple of handheld shots, but very sporadically, and again, never perceptible."

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ASA SHOUL  
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# Home of The Crown



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## SETTING THE PACE

The tragic end to Princess Diana's story presented several challenges for the production. An increase in the pace of the cinematography and editing is evident in the portrayal of Diana and Dodi as they are pressured by press intrusion. "The use of long lenses became more prominent," says Goldman. "We tried to see it from a faraway perspective, having the paparazzi in the foreground or behind them for a moment, but never pretending we are one of them. There's no voyeurism. On *The Crown*, it's always an objective approach instead of a subjective one."

"We had several different airports to recreate, and there are several scenes shot in London that we've made to look like Paris," says Turner. "The art department created an incredible façade for the Paris Ritz Hotel entrance on the back lot at Elstree, while we recreated the whole of the Place Vendôme in CG and populated it with people and cars and everything else."

"The funeral procession on The Mall in London was filmed on an airfield in Oxfordshire, with all the action taking place in front of a giant green screen. After a detailed study, The Mall, including the trees, the buildings and street furniture, were recreated in CG. Eighty supporting actors were filmed, replicated and multiplied in the computer to create a crowd of thousands lining the route of the funeral procession."

Such crowds were a real fixture of the show. "We'd use as many real extras as possible on a shooting day, then when we needed to supplement crowds, our amazing camera crew filmed the extras in full costume against a green screen," says Turner. "The sprite shoot, as we called it, delivered specific actions for specific scenes, covering the angles we needed. You can then fill out a large area of the crowd within the compositing session. The software does all the randomisation and replication [of digitised extras]. You can move a tracked camera through the scene, and they'll all move, and the perspectives will all line up."



## RESPECTING THE PAST

The third season episode *Aberfan*, which includes a horrific recreation of the 1966 disaster, proved an emotional experience for all departments. A village that was a neighbour to the actual location was chosen. "Creatively, our focus was on the personal, and on respect for the victims and their families," says Childs. "Forensic research was essential for our recreation of the village and its school. Its devastated community were going to be part of *The Crown's* audience and the truth had to be seen by them and learned by the rest of the audience. Take the schoolroom – every book, every school bag, every pen and pencil helped tell the story, distilling the detail of the tragedy."

"We all wanted to do our absolute best," says Turner. "There's no archive footage of the actual events in progress, but we did manage to find some references of the area before the tragedy. We created an enormous volume of CG particles representing the slagheap and pulled away at different sections to simulate the internal collapse."

It was very difficult to simulate, and took a long time to render, even with the advances in cloud computing that we were utilising.

Another unexpected challenge was the sunny weather. "There were constant conversations on how to twist the blocking to fit a backlit strategy and try to avoid

bright colours and front-lit situations," says Goldman. "There's a scene where there was rain and sun at the same time, which actually helped the story."

A collapsed school set, shot on the back lot, provided the setting for the aftermath. Silhouettes are used to stark effect by Goldman here, and profoundly in the

stunning overhead shots that close the episode. "Where you see the kids playing, the shadows are bigger than they are. It's like the adults that they didn't become," he says. "It's such a strong episode."

"Everyone's work across the different departments on that episode complemented each other," says Turner. "[Director] Ben Caron did a great job pulling it all together."

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ADRIANO GOLDMAN  
PRINCIPAL CINEMATOGRAPHER





“The Crown’s ambition is for big-screen production values on the small screen,” says Lee Walpole, supervising sound editor for all 60 episodes. The role of sound and music on *The Crown* evolved with the seasons, with a more minimalist score emerging from Series Three onwards. “Much of the time the effects needed to sit back in the mix playing a delicate supporting role enhancing, embellishing adding character and focus but never distracting from what’s being said,” recalls Walpole.

### EMOTIONAL COMPOSITION

Hans Zimmer provided the cinematic title theme, but Martin Phipps took up the baton from Season Three onwards, following Rupert Gregson-Williams and Lorne Balfe as composer.

“I’d be given the script and have a few conversations with Peter Morgan,” says Phipps. “Based on initial reactions to the script I would go away and write a whole album’s worth of material while they were filming.”

Phipps refined the score based on Morgan’s reactions to his musical ideas. Morgan’s notes, such as an episode that ran like a colour chart, “from bright rose pink at the start to dark red at the end”, were an inspiration he says.

The score would next go to the editors, who placed it in scenes based on their interpretation. Following feedback from

Morgan and the directors, Phipps then further refined, recorded, and added orchestral elements to the music, ensuring it complemented the episodes’ final edits.

Getting the tone right was a constant challenge. When the Queen walks around the village of Aberfan in Season Three, to “make the audience feel emotion about someone who couldn’t feel emotion”, Phipps deploys “a very simple, evolving sustain, one note that just keeps going through and getting louder, then over the top is a plaintive motif on the French horn. It couldn’t be tragic, it had to be a neutral score.”

The story of Michael Fagan breaking into the palace in Season Four led Phipps to explore various musical directions – comic, tense, reverential – ultimately settling on a simple, playful composition that manages to capture all of them. In season six, the pursuit of Diana and Dodi by paparazzi in Paris is accompanied by a drum sound repeated from Dodi’s father’s wedding. “The idea was that Mohamed Al-Fayed was driving a lot of the action,” Phipps reveals. “His ambition for his son had put these people in this place.”

The aim was always for the music to have an ambiguity, but Phipps says the overarching theme emphasised by Morgan was of suppressed power, a grand and epic force beneath the surface. “Kept politely out of sight, but very much there.”

### EFFECTIVE AUDIO

Working around the score, Walpole’s team crafted a unique atmospheric soundtrack for every episode of *The Crown*. After a spotting session with the director and editor based on extensive research, location recording sessions would capture bespoke crowd sound effects, including loops of footsteps recorded in stately homes rather than a Foley studio.

Research also produced rich environmental effects; as years go by, the traffic outside the palace increases from period-authentic engine sounds to a constant background, bird song simplifies, and commercial airlines start going over the city. Regional accents also begin to intrude.

Walpole handled the pre-mix and final mix of sound effects, while Stuart Hilliker and Martin Jensen prioritised maximum intelligibility when remixing dialogue.

“The dialects of our main cast and the supporting characters, and any loop group that was recorded, were all upper-class BBC English,” says Walpole. “Achieving the distinctive cut-glass sound of royal voices involved minimal ADR, adding just incoming consonants to give a ‘clean in’ to the production mix.”

Challenges arose from the expansive and busy sets, requiring phase aligning in the studio to balance boom recordings and the radio mics on the elaborate costumes.

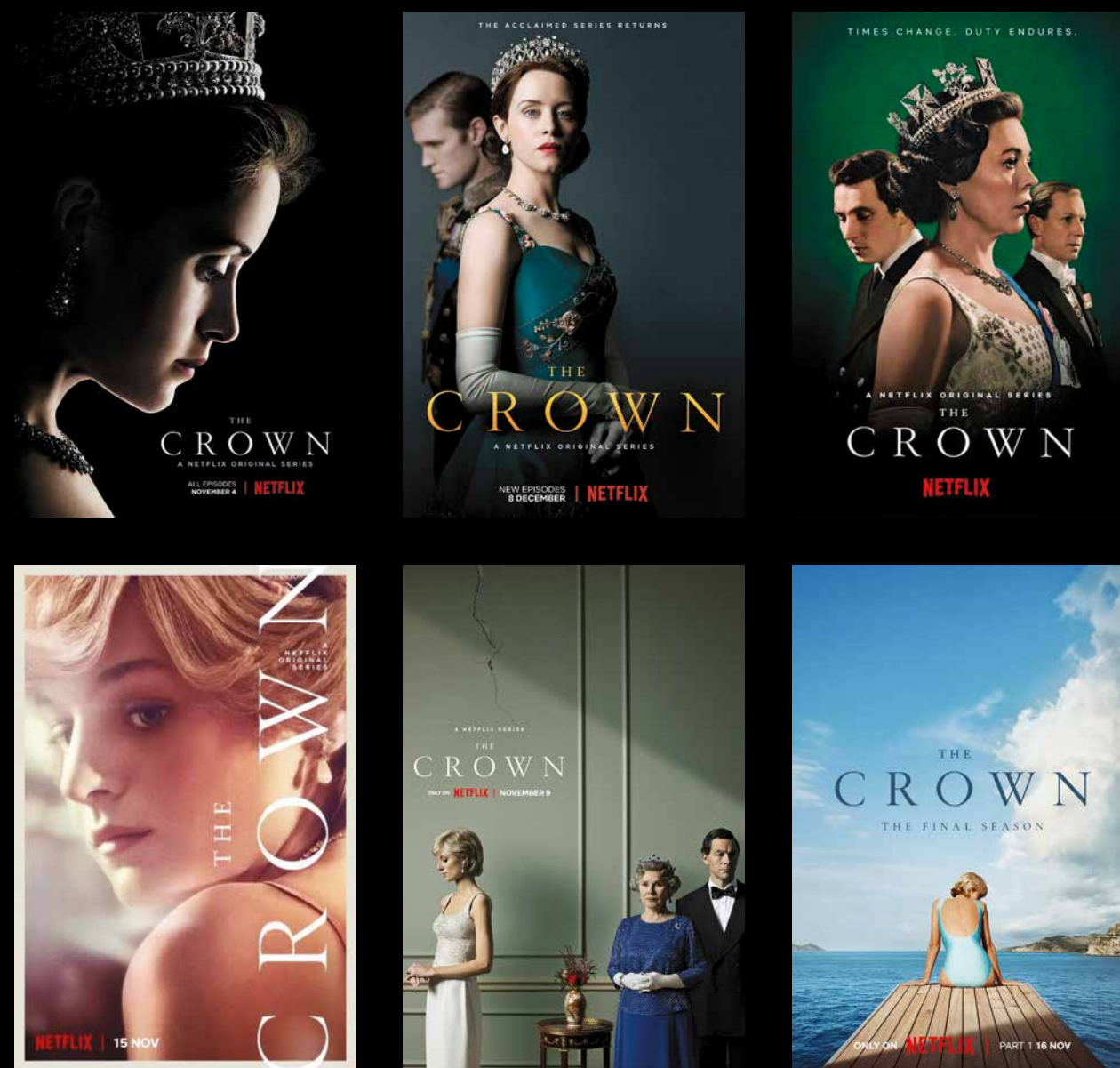
The Aberfan episode featured both extensive visual effects and a music-free opening, so the audio mix had to carry everything. “We tried to use sound in that episode as one would use music to drive the narrative forward,” says Walpole. “We sourced Granada TV footage of a 1960s pit mechanism, recreated it and turned it into a metallic heartbeat that pumps through the valley for the opening ten minutes until the landslide cuts it off.”

The gigantic VFX of the approaching landslide is contrasted by the near silence of the classroom is as quiet as possible, bar the rattling of the glass and the breaths of the children, until the last minute.

“We also created a palette of sound-designed winds, based around the sound of crying and wailing, and utilised it in the absence of a score, to bring to life the landscape echoing the distress of the community,” says Walpole. “It was harrowing, but it was a beautiful episode to do.”

SONY

## Sony Colour



## Seasons 1 -6 of *The Crown*

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