

# THE MOTHER OF ALL SOAPS

1992 is Spain's year of wonders - but Garry Jenkins wonders whether the BBC's new soap opera is really worth the money. He visits Julia Smith, the power behind *Eldorado*, on the programme's £10-million set in Andalucia, and finds that she has no such doubts about the value of her project. Photographs by Paul Massey

John Major should not lose sleep over the fact that Julia Smith, "The Godmother" of television drama, has his name on a hit list. The producer has simply targeted him as a person she would like to position in front of a television set early one Monday evening soon. "I want to get John Major aware of the fact that within the BBC there are people who are trying to carry out his dream," says Smith, the producer of the BBC's new £10-million super-soap, *Eldorado*. "This series is all about a classless society."

It is a short-odds bet that Downing Street will tune in for the first episode of *Eldorado* on July 6. David Mellor, the heritage minister, is sure to be watching, for one. However, they will almost certainly have ulterior motives. For *Eldorado* is not just a show, it is an issue.

*Eldorado* is the BBC's replacement for Terry Wogan's jaded chat show. It will be screened at 7pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for at least a year, and is the single biggest commission ever given to an independent production company in this country. Cinema Verity, headed by another of British television's most powerful women, Verity Lambert, producer of such successful programmes as *Minder*, won the deal last year. Smith and Tony Holland, with whom she created *EastEnders*, are bringing *Eldorado* to life. The new soap's profile was always going to be

high. Everything about the show, set in an expatriate community in southern Spain, is grandiose. It is the only British television programme being made entirely on location overseas, in Andalucia, where a small army of cast, crew and production executives has become effectively exiled.

The grandest element of this grandest of designs, however, is the set, which has been built on a remote 50-acre site on a mountainside near Coin, high above the coast. At least £10 million has been spent on the creation of this City of Gold. Coming at a time when the BBC's future is under scrutiny — its Royal Charter is up for renewal in 1996 — the expenditure has, to say the least, raised eyebrows.

Mellor, whose new brief includes broadcasting, first voiced what many in Westminster were thinking. "The public will want to know if it was necessary to build, with the licence fee, a £10-million village in Spain," he said recently. "Alchemists of old were obsessed with trying to transmute base metals into gold. An understandable folly," the *Daily Mail* said a day later. "But at the end of the second millennium, who other than the BBC would be so scatty as to turn gold into soap?"

It is lucky, then, that the BBC has Smith at the helm, as its new flagship prepares to chart these increasingly agitated waters. Since she began working in television drama almost 30 years

ago, she has acquired a Midas-like reputation. Awarded the Desmond Davis award for outstanding creative contribution to television by Bafta in 1988, her successes have included *Angels*, *The District Nurse* and, most spectacularly, *EastEnders*.

Her talents as a programme-maker are allied to a toughness which will be needed in the coming months. The BBC will not find Smith wanting.

On the terrace of the Hotel Mijas, a smart eyrie above the southern Spanish coast, she is confident about *Eldorado*'s chances. "What is important to me is the challenge, having a dream and making a dream come true. That is what makes all the pain, the leaving home, giving up one's lifestyle for three years or whatever, bearable," she says. "Of course I am bracing myself for the rough ride, but all credit to Jonathan Powell [controller of BBC1] and the BBC, who have been brave enough to trust us to fulfil this crazy dream. If it succeeds, it will do so because it has not been watered down by committee after committee. And if it flops, it flops because we got it wrong. There will be no blame on the BBC."

Until a few months ago, the unmarked dirt track off the mountain road between Mijas and Coin was a road to nowhere. Yet now it is filled with a seemingly endless line of heavily laden lorries. As we approached the site, a Stalag-style security fence loomed into view, stretching for what seemed like miles around the pine-strewn hillside. Once inside, there was an even greater sense of otherworldliness.

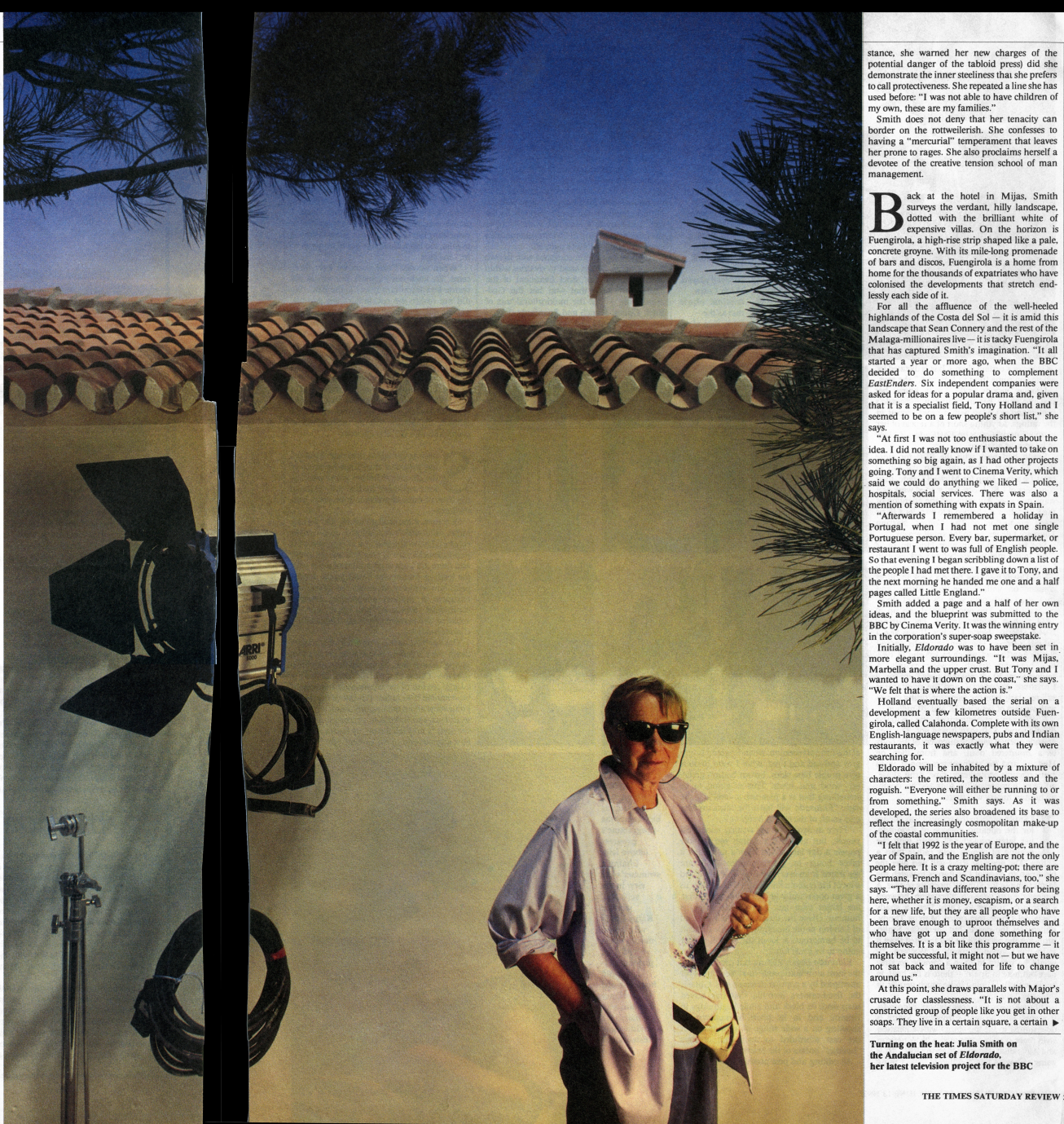
Everywhere there were pile-drivers, steamrollers and JCBs, all literally moving mountains. Ducados-smoking Spanish workmen wielded shovels and trowels,

and all around them was their creation, less a City of Gold, more a City of Whitewash. Since work began in January, a sprawling urbanisation of villas and an "old" Spanish town, complete with town hall and church, has risen out of the red dust. More than 250 locals from Coin have performed this minor miracle. It is a remarkable achievement.

Smith stood in the middle of it all, guiding the newly arrived cast around the still chaotic scene. With an enthusiasm that would not have been out of place in a time-share presentation on the Costa del Sol, she showed each cast member to the homes their characters will inhabit. Smith comes as something of a surprise. There is no trace of the brusque, sometimes brutal reputation she acquired when she reportedly ruled Albert Square with a rod of Thatcher-like iron.

Later, in the site's main restaurant-bar area — appropriately named Mi Tia (My Auntie) by the locals — she formally greeted the programme's 31-strong cast to *Eldorado*. True to her theatrical beginnings, she addressed the gathering as "darlings". When an actor expressed worries about when the show would arrive on screen, she was soothing: "I don't want to worry you with that. I want to stop you all running before you can walk."

Throughout, she exuded a matriarchal warmth; only occasionally (as when, for in-



stance, she warned her new charges of the potential danger of the tabloid press) did she demonstrate the inner steeliness that she prefers to call protectiveness. She repeated a line she has used before: "I was not able to have children of my own, these are my families."

Smith does not deny that her tenacity can border on the ruthless. She concedes to having a "mercurial" temperament that leaves her prone to rages. She also proclaims herself a devotee of the creative tension school of man management.

Back at the hotel in Mijas, Smith surveys the verdant, hilly landscape, dotted with the brilliant white of expensive villas. On the horizon is Fuengirola, a high-rise strip shaped like a pale, concrete groyne. With its mile-long promenade of bars and discos, Fuengirola is a home from home for the thousands of expatriates who have colonised the developments that stretch endlessly each side of it.

For all the affluence of the well-heeled highlands of the Costa del Sol — it is amid this landscape that Sean Connery and the rest of the Malaga-millionaires live — it is tacky Fuengirola that has captured Smith's imagination. "It all started a year or more ago, when the BBC decided to do something to complement *EastEnders*. Six independent companies were asked for ideas for a popular drama and, given that it is a specialist field, Tony Holland and I seemed to be on a few people's short list," she says.

"At first I was not too enthusiastic about the idea. I did not really know if I wanted to take on something so big again, as I had other projects going. Tony and I went to Cinema Verity, which said we could do anything we liked — police, hospitals, social services. There was also a mention of something with expats in Spain."

"Afterwards I remembered a holiday in Portugal, when I had not met one single Portuguese person. Every bar, supermarket, or restaurant I went to was full of English people. So that evening I began scribbling down a list of the people I had met there. I gave it to Tony, and the next morning he handed me one and a half pages called Little England."

Smith added a page and a half of her own ideas, and the blueprint was submitted to the BBC by Cinema Verity. It was the winning entry in the corporation's super-soap sweepstake.

Initially, *Eldorado* was to have been set in more elegant surroundings. "It was Mijas, Marbella and the upper crust. But Tony and I wanted to have it down on the coast," she says. "We felt that is where the action is."

Holland eventually based the serial on a development a few kilometres outside Fuengirola, called Calahonda. Complete with its own English-language newspapers, pubs and Indian restaurants, it was exactly what they were searching for.

*Eldorado* will be inhabited by a mixture of characters: the retired, the rootless and the roughish. "Everyone will either be running to or from something," Smith says. As it was developed, the series also broadened its base to reflect the increasingly cosmopolitan make-up of the coastal communities.

"I felt that 1992 is the year of Europe, and the year of Spain, and the English are not the only people here. It is a crazy melting-pot; there are Germans, French and Scandinavians, too," she says. "They all have different reasons for being here, whether it is money, escapism, or a search for a new life, but they are all people who have been brave enough to uproot themselves and who have got up and done something for themselves. It is a bit like this programme — it might be successful, it might not, but we have not sat back and waited for life to change around us."

At this point, she draws parallels with Major's crusade for classlessness. "It is not about a constricted group of people like you get in other soaps. They live in a certain square, a certain ►

Turning on the heat: Julia Smith on the Andalucian set of *Eldorado*, her latest television project for the BBC





**Soap stars:** actress Polly Perkins (left) plays an amorous single woman with a toyboy lover who is a night-club singer; (below, from left) Sandra Smith, plays a sexy Spanish runaway who works at the riding stables; Kathy Pitkin (foreground); Jesse Birdsall plays a shady Costa criminal, who is cast as the Dirty Den of the series

◀ street or a certain close. Class is dictated by where you come from in England," she says.

Utopian visions aside, Smith knows her real challenge lies in justifying *Eldorado's* profile and price-tag with a rapid success in the ratings. Anything short of a repeat of her extraordinary success on *EastEnders* is likely to be seen as a failure.

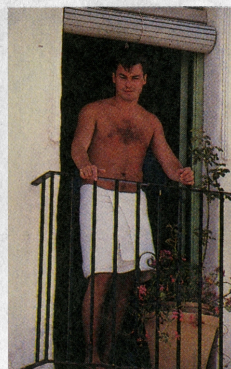
Smith had been with the BBC for more than 20 years, when she won the job of creating a new soap for Michael Grade, then controller of BBC1. She had started work as a stage manager, but attracted the attention of the BBC when she helped it to transfer a Paris stage production of *The Consul*, starring Laurence Olivier, on to the small screen.

She first teamed up with Holland on *Z Cars*, in the mid-Sixties, before working with him on *Angels*, set in a fictitious hospital, in 1976. *Angels* went out twice a week in direct competition with *Coronation Street*, and impressed audiences with its almost documentary style. The duo followed this up in 1984 with a gentler drama, *The District Nurse*, starring Nerys Hughes. It was also a ratings success. The twin triumphs earned Smith *EastEnders*, which by the end of 1986 was breaking British viewing records. A remarkable 30.15 million tuned in for a Christmas day special, and the programme still regularly tops the television rating charts with viewers of between 18 and 20 million.

*EastEnders* revolutionised the popular drama series. Soft soap it was not. The first episode opened with the discovery of the body of a murdered man, and from then on Holland and his scriptwriters tapped in to every possible controversy: rape, drug abuse, adultery, homosexuality, Aids and cot death; all human misery was there.

If Smith sticks to the scripts I was shown for the opening episode of *Eldorado*, her latest project will begin with the pealing of church bells rather than a killing. The opening shots will pan over the old Spanish town of Los Barcos to watch the locals filing in for Sunday morning service. A typically *EastEnders*-ish altercation between *Eldorado's* answer to Dirty Den, a shady Costa del Crime sort called Marcus Tandy, punctuates the peace, but thereafter Smith promises the pace will be less frenzied than it is in the London Borough of Walford. "It would be wrong to have a frenetic cockney pace out here in Spain — there is the heat, to begin with. It is going to be much gentler in that way," she says.

If *EastEnders* was new-realism, *Eldorado*, it seems, will be semi-surrealism. Smith is determined to lift the spirits with a location style more readily associated with American and Australian television than the BBC. "It is going to have a totally different look. I think



at this time of recession, when England is very grey and sad and tired, what I want to do is give people blue skies, brown bodies, greenery, wind and birds. This is going to be something that is a pleasure to look at," she says. "*Eldorado* will have the attractiveness and youth of the cast of *Neighbours*."

"Here in Spain, we are writing about real people, but at the same time you get the papers a day late, if you have a telephone it takes hours to get connected, you are separated from everyday English events, and a lot of life is about killing time. That gives us a great opportunity to create characters that are larger than life. And it also gives us humour. Given the situation in the East End of London at the moment, it is quite difficult to be humorous. A lot of the story lines are going to be great fun."

*Eldorado* began filming last month, using the most ambitious production techniques yet attempted by a popular drama series. Gone is the fixed-camera formula that has served soap since its black and white beginnings in Britain, and in its place is multicamera shooting on a wide range of locations, with the cast scheduled to avoid the obvious "holiday" breaks of the existing soap operas.

All editing and post-production on the 30-

minute programmes will also be done in Spain. Finished episodes will then be flown back to Broadcasting House for transmission.

Smith finds the Godmother label amusing. "It makes me giggle because I am usually far more frightened of the person I am talking to than they are of me," she says, somewhat unconvincingly, having told me earlier: "Tony and I love something going wrong because then we can stir things up."

Smith's matriarchal skills will face their greatest test on *Eldorado*. Every year some 250,000 Britons travel to the Costa del Sol, the bulk of them for an appointment with the nightmare that is the family fortnight in the sun. You have to sympathise with Smith as she faces a minimum of 26 fortnights with an extended family of more than 60.

Her new clan comes equipped with its own special needs. She is used to rivalries within casts — it was her strict treatment of the *EastEnders* team that won her the Godmother tag — but the multicultural mix of Brits, Danes, French and Spaniards she has assembled could be explosive. Working conditions on the set, where the still mountain air can reach high temperatures, are likely to strain relations even more.

Most difficult of all, however, will be the isolation cast members will feel as their own lives mirror those of the characters they are playing. Virtually every actor confessed to dreading life without family and friends more than any other aspect of working on *Eldorado*. "The sadness of separation is something that will give the story lines depth, but it is also a factor I am very much aware of as far as the cast and crew are concerned," Smith says.

Smith knows the stakes could not be higher. It is, though, those stakes that have enticed her back into an arena that, post-*EastEnders* in 1988, she hinted she would never re-enter. "After I left *EastEnders*, I didn't think I would ever consider getting tangled up in something like this again. But this was too big to miss, too big a challenge not to be involved in," she says.

"When we did *EastEnders* we were innocents. We knew our business, but we did not realise how important it was to the BBC. We did not realise the enormity of the gamble, and we did not realise the desperate need the BBC had for a popular early evening show."

"This time the stakes are even higher. This is the largest thing that has ever been undertaken by an independent company. It is going to prove that independents can take on major projects, and that you don't only have to give them little runs of six sitcoms at a time," Smith says. She knows that when a series of trailers starts going out on BBC1 tonight, the blades will be unsheathed in preparation for the first episodes.

Smith is confident, however. Holland has projected story lines for seven of the characters for ten years, whereas for *EastEnders* he had only planned the lives of three characters three years into the future.

Of course, it could all go wrong. On the one hand, *Eldorado's* exorbitant costs could comfortably be absorbed by foreign sales. Its pan-European cast is clearly a selling point and there are high expectations of deals with the leading continental broadcasters. In the past, however, British audiences have demonstrated a marked xenophobia towards continental television, and have not responded well to experiments such as France's *Châteauvallon*.

The Spanish have a proverb: better a quiet death than a public humiliation. It is not a saying, you suspect, Smith would have much time for. "One is aware of the fact that there is a large section of the community that would be delighted if we failed. It is one of the things I hate most about the English character — it is so jealous and unkind to successful people," she says. "I may fall flat on my face or it might be a glorious end to my career." ●

**Soap makers:** cast extras with Philip Drycott, *Eldorado's* director, as he watches the programme's progress (above left); filming a swimmer's-eye view in the set's pool (above); Kathy Pitkin will arouse most interest early on, playing a 16-year-old homeless girl from London who marries a middle-aged restaurateur

