

DIALOGUE

TIME OF SERIES

A dialogue with

JAVIER OLIVARES

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HÉCTOR GÓMEZ

INTRODUCTION

In contrast with the situation in the US, where the showrunner is considered the supreme representation of the brand image of a television show and the audience's and critics' expectations towards it, TV show creators in Spain do not seem to have achieved such a prominent status. In a television industry like ours, an industry that is still extremely dependent on the financial contributions of big media conglomerates and that attempts to sustain some kind of *star system* with the same nearly omnipresent actors, it is also necessary to consider the professionals who, while usually going unnamed and unrecognized, constitute a fundamental element in the history of television in Spain.

For example, it is impossible to understand Spanish TV fiction of the last two decades without Javier Olivares. Both on his own and in collaboration with his brother Pablo, Olivares is

responsible for some of the most successful TV productions of recent years. However, his career exemplifies the volatility of a profession dependent on audience ratings. Indeed, Olivares has experienced the unpleasant side of the TV business first hand when his audience has turned its back on him or when network executives have lacked the patience to give one of his series the chance of a longer run.

With the third season of *The Department of Time* (El Ministerio del Tiempo, Javier Olivares and Pablo Olivares, TVE: 2015-) currently on the air, backed by the injection of new capital from the VOD platform Netflix, resulting in more ambitious technical features and plot developments, we took this opportunity to talk to Javier Olivares about the creation process and the coordination of the screenplay for a production of this calibre, about the TV industry in Spain, and, in short, about how he defines a profession that is definitely worthy of greater recognition.

Now that *The Department of Time* has entered its third season, there can be no room left for doubt that it is one of the most important Spanish TV series of the past few decades. What are the formulae that make these productions work and, in particular, keep them from running out of steam?

Thanks for the compliment. Regarding the formula for the supposed success, I don't know what to say because for some our series is a hit, while for others it's an absolute failure. On the same day I had one reporter tell me it was a success and another tell me the opposite. So I will answer from a personal standpoint, which is the only one I can be sure of. Basically, I am proud of *The Department of Time*. To make it I have worked for four years of my life, day in day out. At first, with Pablo. When he was gone, with his memory. With the idea that we both had to make a series just for the pleasure of writing it, and, as hypothetical viewers, seeing it. Even if we didn't manage to sell it. We wanted to be ourselves and make a popular series and I think we did it. We wanted to make a series in which the script was the most important thing and we made it. In terms of the day-to-day work, the important thing is to put together a team in which everybody is better than you at something... And to let them work. Listening to everybody's opinion and then deciding yourself. But never before listening to everybody else. And, of course, defending your ideas and your concept to everyone, even your own team. You need discipline and loyalty to the project. Obviously, if you want to be able to do whatever you want, you should write poetry. To be a screenwriter means to satisfy the client, which is basically the TV network and the producer. But, in general, I think networks and producers often forget that, if they contact a particular creator, it's because that creator is who he is, and not because they want to change him. The truth is that the best formula that my brother Pablo and I have used in our careers is knowing how to say "no" to giving up our identity. With-



Filming of *The Department of Time* (© Tamara Arranz)

out that fight to defend your style, to pull away from the mainstream, we never would have made *The Department of Time* or the first season of *Isabel* (Javier Olivares, TVE: 2012-2014). Or *Infidels* (Javier Olivares, TV3: 2009-2011). To be able to make them, apart from the effort and the formula I've mentioned, you need to find people in the networks who believe in you and will let you work freely. In that sense, our series would never have existed without public television networks, and, more specifically, without Mónica Terribas (TV3) and Fernando López-Puig (TVE). Without them, I think I would have gone back to my History of Art classes at the IED [European Institute of Design] in Madrid, or I'd be selling encyclopaedias door to door, who knows?

One of the most striking aspects of this new season is the presence of Netflix as a producer. Could this be a new way of producing Spanish TV fiction, given that the Spanish television industry is less consolidated than in other countries? On the other hand, has the presence of Netflix imposed any constraints on the structure of the series (the duration of the episodes, modifications to some plotlines, etc.)?

It is a new way. And a necessary one. But I think the Spanish industry is very consolidated. It's just

that it takes a creative direction that I often don't agree with, although I respect it. But it is consolidated. Regarding Netflix, we're grateful for the interest they've taken in our series after the broadcast of the first two seasons. I guess if they were interested in co-producing this third season it would be because the ratings or the brand of the series looked interesting to them. As far as constraints are concerned, I would have been happy if they had required us to reduce the episode length to fifty minutes, but that didn't happen. The only thing we were asked to do was to include episodes with issues that would be recognizable to an in-



The Department of Time (Pablo Olivares & Javier Olivares, TVE: 2015-) (© Tamara Arranz)

ternational audience. Hence the episode about Hitchcock, the one about Operation Mincemeat, the ones about Bolívar and the Spanish conquest of the Americas. But everything is still from the perspective of a Department that can only travel within Spanish territory, of course. We were not going to change that, because it's the essence of the series.

In any case, the presence of Netflix and other VOD platforms (HBO, Amazon) not only in the distribution process but also in the production of films and TV series is now a reality. There was a lot of talk at the last Cannes Festival about the

“danger” of having films going straight to television without ever screening in theatres. Do you think there is any point in debating this transformation in the model of consumption, or is there no turning back now and should we just accept it as the new paradigm?

Some time ago, different gurus used to talk about the need to develop new creations for all the new media. But Netflix discovered (they probably wouldn't have if not for HBO's creative work beforehand) that this wasn't the key, that the key was making good series, as always, for the new media, the new screens, and that the spectators could be their own programmers, and not have to watch things when others wanted them to and with interminable ad breaks. The thing is that every change has its critics. But in this case, the change is inevitable, with all its virtues and defects. I don't think that Netflix is cinema's main problem. It's cinema itself and how it has evolved commercially and creatively. And don't talk to me about the communal act of sharing a film... I can watch any film or any series much better in my own home than in a movie theatre where people are talking, kicking your seat, talking on their phones or making eating and drinking noises... I love theatre and dance, and I get increasingly exasperated with people's lack of respect of for the performers on the stage. But theatre is irreplaceable: I need it. It is a unique and unrepeatable moment. Films are not. I can see them in the theatre or at home. And that's not even taking into account that television series have on average been of a higher quality than cinema for decades. I wish I could bring Walter Benjamin back to life to write *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* today. He was a genius who foresaw everything. I'm sure he would have a great time doing it.

You have worked in very varied productions in terms of budget and distribution. What changes from working on a small TV series to working on

big productions like *Isabel* or *The Department of Time*?

In your work as a screenwriter or a producer, nothing. You always have to do the best you can with what you have at your disposal. In terms of budget, my series for TV3 were about 200,000 euros per episode... But for me, *Infidels* is, together with the first season of *Isabel* and *The Department of Time*, my best work. But don't misunderstand me: those two didn't have budgets any bigger than the fiction series made in Spain before the crisis. *Isabel* had an unstable budget in relation to the ambition of those of us who worked so hard on the series. A lot of episodes had only around six to eight location shots. And even the first two seasons of *The Department of Time* had a lower budget than *Isabel* and other series. The thing is that we've all put our heart and soul into *The Department of Time*. From yours truly to the last gaffer. Its look suggests a bigger budget than it actually has. And that's also because there are no net benefits and a lot of the professionals working for us have accepted lower salaries than they would have charged anywhere else. That's the only way you can make a TV series with 60% location shots, 200 extras, and time travel to two or three different eras for 576,000 euros per episode. With what one episode of *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, HBO: 2011-) costs, we could almost make a whole season of our series.

You have worked on shows that have been broadcast nationally and on others that have been broadcast on local stations. How does the conception of a TV series change depending on where it will be shown?

I tell stories the best way I can wherever they let me. I don't make any distinctions.

It is already a cliché that we are in a “golden age of television”, at least in the US, which seems to be setting the trend. However, there is a sense that in Spain, despite the obvious improvement

in the quality of TV fiction in the past few years, the critics still don't fully support it. Why do you think this is the case? Is it an industry problem, a public support issue or a lack of “education” among viewers?

There is a strong industry. Public support is deficient because TVE's resources are constantly shrinking and our politicians think of television as a means of power or of mere evasion. They all rave about how good *Borgen* (Adam Price, DR1: 2010-2013) or *Game of Thrones* are, but then they don't take the trouble to recognise the worldwide potential of TV fiction in a language like ours, which is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. In the end, the audience will be educated on its own. We can't look at them like an entomologist examines butterflies, pinned to a board. Viewers are intelligent enough to switch off when they're being treated badly. And now they can go to Netflix or HBO. In a few years, if we don't understand this, it will all be over.

As for the golden age, it tends to be more of a marketing phrase than anything else. Or the chorus of a song written by someone who thinks the world (and TV series) was created when he was born. I think the 60s and 70s on the BBC or the 90s in the US were golden ages as good as or even better than the current one. In Spain, I think our golden age was the age of Ibáñez Serrador, Armiñán, Ana Diosdado, Pedro Costa, etc. But there seems to be a desire to forget the TVE series of that era, which, by the way, were forty or fifty minutes long and had their creators running the show...

Secondly, European fiction is just as good as what is being made in the US. The BBC is and always has been a benchmark. Now, Denmark, Sweden and Norway are investing in and producing shows like *Bron/Broen* (Hans Rosenfeldt, SVT1 and DR1: 2011-), *Folbrydelsen* (Søren Sveistrup, DR1: 2007-2012), *Okkupert* (Jo Nesbø, Erik Skjoldbjærg, Karianne Lund, TV2: 2015), and *Nobel* (Per-Olav Sørensen, NRK, 2016). In Italy, Go-

morrah (Roberto Saviano, Sky Italia: 2014-), *Romanzo Criminale* (Stefano Sollima, Sky Cinema 1: 2008-2010) or *1992* (Stefano Accorsi, Sky Cinema 1: 2016). In Germany, apart from its romantic TV film industry (which is broadcast on Spanish television every weekend like there's no tomorrow), they are making marvellous series like *Generation War* (Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter, Stefan Kolditz, ZDF: 2013) or *Deutschland 83* (Anna Winger, Joerg Winger, RTL: 2015). France has produced *Braquo*

focus on social and political issues. And they focus on Europe. They don't copy what comes from the US; it's quite the other way around. A lot of people here are still obsessed with the US, when the models to follow are much closer.

Finally, Spain. We are not in a golden age of Spanish TV fiction. We are in a heroic era of production companies that have to make seventy-minute episodes with an average budget of 500,000 euros. While in all the series we like



The Department of Time (Pablo Olivares & Javier Olivares, TVE: 2015-) (© Tamara Arranz)

(Oliver Marchal, Canal+: 2009-2016), *Engrenages* (Alexandra Clert, Guy-Patrick Sainderichin, Canal+: 2005-), or *Les Revenants* (Fabrice Gobert, Canal+: 2012-)... All of these have bigger production budgets than ours. *1864* (Ole Bornedal, DR1: 2014) was an eight-episode Danish series with a budget of almost three million euros per episode. Now Belgium is offering gems like *Hotel Beau Séjour* (Bert Van Dael, Sanne Nuyens, Benjamin Sprengers, Één and Netflix: 2017-) or *La Trêve* (Matthieu Donck, La Une, France 2 and Netflix: 2016-), relatively cheap series that have nevertheless gained attention in the US, as happened previously with Israel, which is where the ideas for series like *Homeland* (Howard Gordon, Alex Gansa, Showtime: 2011-) and *In Treatment* (Rodrigo Garcia, HBO: 2008-2010) came from... Daring new series are being made in Europe, series that mix genres and that



The Department of Time (Pablo Olivares & Javier Olivares, TVE: 2015-) (© Tamara Arranz)

(European or American), the showrunner is an essential figure, there are still people here who need an explanation of what that word even means. There is no self-criticism. Sometimes, not even criticism. And this creates the false appearance that we're all delighted to know one another (well, some more than others). If we used the time we spend gazing at ourselves in the mirror to study and work, this country would be amazing. And its TV fiction, too.

It is especially interesting to note how TV fiction productions are conceived differently depending on the networks that co-produce and broadcast them. It seems obvious that, in Spain (with exceptions, of course) Atresmedia focuses on thrillers and stylised, "exportable" police shows, Mediaset on comedy with more cos-

tumbrišta touches, and TVE has found success lately with series that combine history and adventure (*Águila Roja* [Daniel Écija, Pilar Nadal, Ernesto Pozuelo, Juan Carlos Cueto, TVE: 2009-2016], *The Department of Time*) or that revisit our past (*Cuéntame cómo pasó* [Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, TVE: 2001-]). When a new project is being proposed, do you take this into account?

I would not be so strict with labels. I think Atresmedia has made some great comedy series and productions like *Vis a Vis* (Iván Escobar, Esther Martínez, Álex Pina and Daniel Écija, Antena 3: 2015-2016) or *Sin Identidad* (Samuel Bouza, Antena 3: 2014-2015), and now *La catedral del mar* (Jordi Frades, Antena 3: 2017-) with Netflix. And Mediaset has produced *El Príncipe* (Aitor Gabilondo Sánchez, César Benítez Delgado, Telecinco: 2014-2016), *Sé quién eres* (Pau Freixas, Telecinco: 2017), and has even dared to make a (seriously underrated) series about Mario Conde that exposed the people behind the scandal. It's true they have their target, but they're able to do a wide range of things. TVE has occupied the territory of historical series, but also adventure. Recovering the production power of TVE (which won't happen without advertising revenue or any other funding alternatives) and getting Movistar working, along with the arrival of Netflix and HBO, will improve quality all round. Because all the networks and platforms have top-notch professionals who, maybe then, will dare to go further. As for me, I just do what I like. Whether I create it myself or get hired to do it. I don't look down on anybody. There can be no professionalism without respect, or without self-criticism either.

Focusing on your work as the showrunner and screenwriter, what is your usual way of working when you're preparing a new series? Do you plan the development of the

whole plot from the beginning or separate it by seasons?

The first thing is the concept, as Manquín says in *Airbag* (Juanma Bajo Ulloa, 1997). The only one I only designed by seasons was *Isabel* (three of them), and then I left after finishing the first one. So I prefer to work season to season, because assuming that the series will get renewed or that you will keep working on it is a pretty ridiculous leap of faith, given the state of affairs today. And after working out the overall concept and the narrative arc for the season, I go episode by episode, and then sequence by sequence, always relating everything to the overall concept of the series, to the particular concept of each episode... Putting the characters above the adventure. Always. And invoking the great masters who have always guided me: Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Jardiel Poncela.



Filming of *The Department of Time* (© Tamara Arranz)

How do the strict television shooting deadlines affect the screenwriting process? Are you ever forced to change or eliminate certain scenes because they will be too complicated to shoot? Does this end up affecting the original idea?

What actually affects the screenwriting process is the opposite situation: when the plans are not strictly laid out. To ensure they are, you have to

work in the other direction: from the script. The script is what measures everything. Other than that, you have to write what can be produced and keep in contact with the director, the art department, location scouting, etc. It's important to know what you can do before writing, because that way the changes are never too significant. That's why it would be ideal to have the time to get enough of the script written for the first day of shooting. That doesn't usually happen. When something affects an idea too much, I'd prefer to change the idea or subject rather than compromising it.

Series production poses a lot of problems, but also offers a lot of advantages. The most obvious one is the ability to present a deeper and more complex portrait of the characters. To what extent do you think it's important to have interesting characters for a series to work? Are there any other key elements to success?

There is no cinema, no series, no theatre without characters, or without good dialogue. When I say dialogue, I also mean subtext, silences and points of view. Dialogue isn't reciting, it's listening. And verbalizing everything a character feels is like writing for dummies through equally dopey characters. We don't do it in real life and so fictional characters shouldn't do it either. They'd lose their truth. And without truth, the audience (which is very intelligent) changes the channel or turns off the TV. It doesn't matter if you're doing a family series, a series about time travel, a historical series or a science-fiction series. Without truth, any genre is crap.

You have worked on the scriptwriting team for big hit series (*Los Serrano* [Daniel Écija, Alex Pina, Telecinco: 2003-2008], *Los hombres de Paco* [Daniel Écija, Alex Pina, Antena 3: 2005-2010], *Isabel*, *The Department of Time*), but also for productions that didn't work so well, such as *London Street* (Antena 3: 2003) or, more recently, the very ambitious *Víctor Ros* (Javier Olivares, TVE: 2015-

). Do you think such ups and downs are a natural part of working in TV?

You can't always hit the mark. And you learn from those ups and downs, especially to figure out where the mistake was. In the case of *London Street*, my brother, Fernando Eiras and I had created a sitcom about a group of students in London. But the series was made without us: we left even before pre-production began. There was nothing of ours there. They say that Boris Vian died of a heart attack while watching the film adaptation of *I Spit on Your Graves*. I dared to watch the first episode of *London Street* and I almost snuffed it. I got a fever, I'm not joking. And I quit screenwriting. Actually, I had stopped after the meeting where I left the series in the hands of the producer and the network. It was the worst meeting of my career. I was told things like "take note of what we're telling you, because that's what a screenwriter has to do." And after answering that if that was what being a screenwriter was I would rather sell tissues at a traffic light, I left the room.

A while later, Alex Pina called me to work on *Los hombres de Paco*. I came back to the profession thanks to him, and I will always be thankful to him for that. Then they called me to work on *Los Serrano*, where my brother was working as executive producer. I spent some very happy years there but it was also a very sad ending. Pablo was a great boss. And I wrote some episodes that I'm very proud of. I left before everything that happened in the series turned out to be a dream.

As for *Víctor Ros*, I don't think it could be defined as "ambitious". Not even its budget. At least not its first season, which was the one I created. I wasn't there on the second season. I'm proud of my *Víctor Ros*. It was sold to Movistar and was released there before being broadcast on TVE. It was very profitable. And it allowed me, after being freed from the novel, to create a politically very daring series. Of course, I did have to change the era because the character didn't fit historically at all, so I set it in 1894.

In its first season—the one we did—*Isabel* managed to win a big enough audience to compete with very quality series like *La que se avecina* (Alberto Caballero, Telecinco: 2007-) and *Tu cara me suena* (Antena 3: 2011-). And all that with a strictly historical series. Nobody remembers that. Of course, it helped that—even if TVE had no advertising—there was still a bigger audience that followed the network back then and that hasn't come back to it. But in a few years everything has changed. And you realise that traditional audiences are right, but they are not enough. There is a new way of watching TV and TV series.

The Department of Time is a great example of that. It's a leader on social networks, it has a great VOD audience, it has received nearly fifty awards in two years... Its first two seasons have shown that you can make a reputable series without being a ratings leader. If everybody talks about it, it means that more people are watching it than the ratings are telling us.

How have success and failure affected you when approaching new projects?

The important thing is to know the reasons why something doesn't work. In fact, our first series was a failure, a show called *Ni contigo ni sin ti* (1998). Pablo, Alex Pina, and I wrote it. If you see everything the three of us made afterwards, we weren't a bad writing team. It was a time when failure seemed impossible, but we failed big time. And you learn that the audience is smart, because the series was like a genetically impossible cross-breed between a trout and a monkey. We had made a comedy but the director and the main actor insisted in making it a drama. It was like Louis de Funes being directed by Bergman. And that's when you realize that, if you're going to die, it's better to die with your ideas and your style, and not with someone else's. It's like if you're riding in the front seat of a car and you see a curve and a 50km/h sign, and you warn the driver about it, but he decides to speed up to

100km/h because he thinks he's smarter than everybody else. And, of course, you crash. You have to be very careful not to accept rides from people who don't know how to drive.

You learn a lot from failures. But in this job, success belongs to the team and failure is the screenwriters' fault. If you succeed, the executive says "we." If you fail, they say "the project didn't meet the objectives we set." And often, what you see is not what was written, because so many people have introduced changes to it that you can't even recognize what you created. When the intention and meaning of your script get changed so much, you never know if it would have failed had it been done according to your original idea. What is certain is that if they are reinterpreted too far away from the original idea, failure is inevitable. That is the first lesson in the book, but a lot of people never learn it. What I've learnt is to run away before that even happens. And there are times when it's better to ask for your name to be deleted from the credits if what's been done to your script has nothing to do with what you wrote. It is a legal right, and it does not mean that you won't get paid for your work. Pablo and I did it for *Camino de Santiago* (Antena 3: 1999). It was a miniseries which, in our screenplay, had half a dozen murders. When we received the shooting script after the producer had changed it, we found that in the first episode alone there were more deaths than on D-Day, and it had turned into an ode to misogyny, an issue that we were, and I am, especially sensitive to. We had to take it to court, but we managed to get our names out of there. We should have done the same thing with *London Street*. If executives, producers or directors want to play at being screenwriters, they should put their own names on it, so they can take responsibility not only for the successes, but the failures as well.

As one of the most important screenwriters and creators today, I'm sure you get a lot of offers to



The Department of Time (Pablo Olivares & Javier Olivares, TVE: 2015-) (© Tamara Arranz)

write films. Why, apart from *Vorvik* (José Antonio Vitoria, 2005), haven't you worked in cinema?

No, not one offer. And lately I can't even sell a TV series. So I'm probably not as important as you say. Pablo and I wrote a lot of movie scripts. We would often get funding from the Department of Culture, but then the movies were never made. Basically, because in Spain to get your films made you have to direct them yourself. Spain is not a country for movie screenwriters. Nevertheless, we managed to get to films made. Pablo wrote *Sabor Latino* (Pedro Carvajal, 1996). You can imagine how it was because I had to take him out of the premiere so that what I said about Boris Vian wouldn't happen to him. He was getting sicker by the minute. It reminded me of that scene in *Airplane!* (Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, Jerry Zucker, 1980) where Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the co-pilot of the plane, gets sicker and sicker. And I'm not surprised, to be honest: it was an absolute horror. Then, the both of us wrote *Vorvik*, adapt-

ing a fabulous novel, *De las cenizas*, by someone I really care about: Guillermo Galván. The director (a former screenwriter) changed the ending without telling us. And we weren't invited to the press conference or the premiere. So we thought that if that was the way we were going to be treated, what were we doing in this business? And I've never gone back. The truth is that I really don't miss it. I'm very happy making TV series.

Going back to *The Department of Time*, this series confirms your fondness for the historical genre, which has also proved to be very successful with viewers. Are we a country that prefers to learn history from television rather than from books? Do you believe that fiction should have an "educational" role, or should it just entertain without getting into more complex issues?

TV is TV, and books are books. In Spain people read historical novels, with writers of the stature of Posteguillo, who is just as good as any foreign

author. Fiction should entertain, but it shouldn't settle for just entertaining. Above all, the viewer has to be respected. If you think you're better than you really are, if you think that the viewer is beneath you, as well as being an idiot, you're on your way to nowhere fast. It's different to believe, as I do, that not everybody can like your work. In fact, I am suspicious of things that try to please everyone. If you have one audience, you can't have another one. You have to choose. And that depends on the story you're telling and how you're telling it. I try not to keep my audience free either from laughter when it's needed, or from emotional pain when it's appropriate. I don't like escapism as a sport. I don't like things lukewarm, or horror TV shows that aren't scary, or romantic series where everybody loves each other before they've even met. I hate villains that are too evil and heroes that are too virtuous. Life is an immense spectrum of greys. And you have to present everybody's reasons and then let the audience choose who is good and who is bad... if they can. That is much more important for educational purposes. Promoting thought, defending intelligence, and not simplifying something as complex and fascinating as life. And fiction has to be a mirror of life.

In addition to your work as a screenwriter, you have participated in other spaces (TV, radio) dedicated in one way or another to history. Do you feel comfortable in that role as a “populariser” of history?

I feel better when writing. It must be the age, but I increasingly need solitude while creating. In fact, the effort that I exert on social networks exhausts me, but there's no other option. If you don't have a voice in this business it doesn't mean you're mute: it means you're dead. Of course, I have fond memories of my experience on the radio show *A vivir que son dos días* with Javier del Pino and Lourdes Lancho. It was Lourdes who called me for that. She suggested I join the show for the summer and

I ended up staying for a whole year. That same year the program won an Ondas award. That year I felt like I had won two Ondas: the one for *The Department of Time* and the one for *A vivir que son dos días* won. I felt very comfortable there because I really love radio; I would love to do a radio program some day. And because I was surrounded by people who, apart from being real professionals, are also really good people.

In any case, *The Department of Time* cannot be considered a historical series in the strict sense, since it is closer to the adventure genre, with a dystopian background. Similarly, while in *Isabel* the character played by Michelle Jenner was the obvious protagonist, in *The Department of Time* there seems to be more of an ensemble with very strong supporting roles. Is this one of the secrets for the show's success?

The Department of Time is an adventure series in the fantasy genre that is based on history. It is not a rigorously historical series, as *Isabel* was, with dialogues taken from real letters and chronicles. But both series had to entertain and hook the audience. It is true that the concepts for each episode of *The Department of Time* are very thoroughly documented; I'd be a pretty poor historian if they weren't. But of course, we have much more creative freedom than on *Isabel*.

The history of Spain is so extensive and diverse that it would definitely provide enough material for several seasons of *The Department of Time*, but you have said a few times that you don't see yourself extending the show much longer. Do you think there is a “natural” expiry date for a television series?

Yes. Chewing gum can't be stretched out too much. Every story has its ending. And the higher the note you end on, the better. You need to know when to end something. Or when to stop and then come back. The process of creating, writing and producing this series is very complex. We can't

continue at the pace we've maintained up until now, especially with seventy-minute episodes. When this season ends, in just three years we will have made 34 seventy-minute movies (rather than episodes) set in fifty different historical eras. Any BBC series would do that much in eight seasons with breaks in between. A friend told me on Facebook that expecting us to continue like this was like expecting a rock band to never stop touring but also to make new albums at the same time. I think it's a perfect analogy.

I love BBC series or programs with six or eight episodes. You don't tire out the audience or repeat the characters' stories. Because characters have their cycles too. They either evolve or it's better to change them.

Do you feel it's legitimate to extend a series just because the audience seems to be responding to it with good ratings?

It is legitimate: this is a business. But expecting that a high level of quality can be maintained is ingenuous. Of course, it also depends on the format: look at *Coronation Street* (Tony Warren, ITV: 1960-). But my series are certainly not made to go on forever. Nor can you ask an actor to play the same role forever, or a screenwriter to write forever for the same series.

There's also the question of the whole fan phenomenon that the series has generated, something very common for series in the English-speaking world, but very unusual in our country. Were you expecting this kind of devoted reaction from the audience?

Never. I think in that sense we have also been pioneers. Well, our fans have been, the so-called "*ministéricos*". I have only helped them out where I could. The credit belongs to them and to Pablo Lara Toledo, our transmedia producer and one of the most talented and hardworking people I have ever met.

Once the cycle of *The Department of Time* ends, having set the bar so high, what are your plans for the future?

Reading, travelling... I have to reconstruct and redesign myself. I have some projects I believe in as strongly as I believed in *Infidels*, *Isabel*, and *The Department of Time*. And I have an international project that has been offered to me that looks marvellous, both for its subject and, especially, for the people who have contacted me about it. I think that, given the way things are right now, we have to try to leave Spain, to work abroad. I wouldn't rule out going back to work on my third novel or doing some theatre. Those are my roots, where I learnt everything... and I really look forward to going back to it. For the time being, I'll rest and let life decide for me. No matter what, I know that *The Department of Time* is something that is going to leave its mark on me. As much as not having Pablo by my side anymore. Writing and sharing a sideways glance when someone said something ridiculous. And then laughing out loud together, of course. Or talking about the Atleti [Atlético Madrid football club], which was our most usual source of entertainment. Over the course of our lives, we worked separately a lot. But I have the feeling that when the series is over it will somehow be like saying goodbye to him again.

Would you like to continue working on this big budget format with international reach (and high expectations) or take a chance on projects with humbler production and distribution?

I don't mind as long as they allow me to create my way and express my emotions. I have always believed that out of little things big things can grow. And that, sometimes, things that start out with big intentions never achieve their goal. So, whatever type of project it is, I'll take it as a little thing with the chance of turning into something really big. And it's not only a matter of production. It's a matter of soul. ■

JAVIER OLIVARES. TIME OF SERIES

Abstract

Thanks to the unexpected success of *The Department of Time* (El Ministerio del Tiempo, Pablo Olivares and Javier Olivares, TVE: 2015-), Javier Olivares is now considered one of the most important TV fiction creators and screenwriters in Spain. In this interview, he talks about his view of the screenwriting profession, the creation process and the immediate future of *The Department of Time*. He also discusses the state of the Spanish TV industry and offers a critical review of his successes and failures in his career as a screenwriter.

Keywords

Screenwriter; showrunner; *The Department of Time*; Javier Olivares; TV series

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Héctor Gómez received a Bachelor's degree in Art History from Universitat of València. He is associated with various cultural management projects, and since 2012 has been a member of Universitat de València's Aula de Cinema, where he has contributed to the organisation of numerous film series and presentations. He has also worked for various online publications writing reviews and articles about cinema. He is currently a contributor to the independent cinema website Inédito Films and the technical coordinator of the Aula de Cinema at Universitat de València.

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JAVIER OLIVARES. TIEMPO DE SERIES

Resumen

Gracias al inesperado éxito de *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (Pablo Olivares y Javier Olivares, TVE: 2015-), Javier Olivares es considerado hoy uno de los creadores y guionistas de ficción televisiva más importantes de nuestro país. En esta entrevista se tratan, entre otras cuestiones, su modo de entender la profesión, el proceso de creación y el futuro inmediato de *El Ministerio del Tiempo*, se discute sobre la situación de la industria televisiva española y el propio Olivares hace un repaso crítico a los éxitos y fracasos de su carrera como guionista.

Palabras clave

Guionista; showrunner; *El Ministerio del Tiempo*; Javier Olivares; series de televisión.

Autor

Héctor Gómez (Valencia, 1982) es licenciado en Historia del Arte por la Universitat de València. Vinculado a diferentes proyectos relacionados con la gestión cultural, desde 2012 es miembro del Aula de Cinema de la Universitat de València en la que ha colaborado en la elaboración de numerosos ciclos y presentaciones. Ha trabajado asimismo para diferentes publicaciones online con críticas y artículos sobre el campo cinematográfico. En la actualidad colabora regularmente en la web de cine independiente Inédito Films y es coordinador técnico del Aula de Cinema de la Universitat de València.

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