



RIVALRY AND REBELLION IN THE UPPER CLASS

With its themes of political polarisation and family division, UKTV and BritBox International's story of the scandalous Mitford sisters aims to transcend its mid-20th century setting to appeal to a modern, global audience.

Alice Redman reports

Firebird Pictures' *Outrageous* tells the story of the infamous Mitford sisters in all its gaudy detail. For writer Sarah Williams, the series has been a two-decade journey. "I first read Mary Lovell's book, on which the series is based, in 2001," she explains. "I wrote a treatment and sent it to my agent thinking, 'I'm 10 minutes away from a commission.' And here we are, more than 20 years later."

Lovell's biography, *The Mitford Girls*, chronicles the lives of the six sisters, who grew up in an aristocratic family, largely isolated in their countryside estate. Not allowed to be educated, the girls craved freedom and developed an interest in writing and politics.

The eldest, Nancy, became an accomplished novelist, with notable works *The Pursuit Of Love* and

Love In A Cold Climate. Diana, considered a great beauty, divorced Bryan Guinness, one of the heirs to the Guinness family brewing fortune, to marry British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley.

Unity was a friend of Hitler and tried to end her life when Britain declared war on Germany, while communist Jessica, or 'Decca', who eloped with her second cousin Esmond to join the Spanish Civil War, later wrote investigative articles. Deborah eventually became a duchess and developed Chatsworth House into one of Britain's most successful stately homes. Second-eldest Pam lived a quiet life in comparison to her sisters. And they also had a brother, Thomas.

While Nancy Mitford's books have been adapted several times for TV, with Emily Mortimer's 2021 reimaging of *The Pursuit Of Love* for BBC1 the most



recent, Williams says she believes the sisters' story is "so much more gripping".

"Nancy's novels were great fun, but she edited out the pain, anguish, grief and sibling rivalry," she adds.

Firebird Pictures chief executive Liz Kilgariff says Williams' enthusiasm for the project helped cement her own long-standing desire to do something with the screenwriter. But they knew it was far from a done deal.

"I thought, 'Oh gosh, a period show. They're hard to get away – but how do we make this happen?'," Kilgariff recalls.

The pair took the project to then UKTV drama chief Philippa Collie Cousins, who, Kilgariff says, "got it immediately, loved it, and was a real champion of the project".



Helen Perry, Collie-Cousins' successor as head of drama, picked up the series with gusto.

"I never met Philippa, but she played a blinder on this one and I'm so grateful to her," Perry says.

For the broadcaster, whose current drama slate leans more into the crime and thriller space, *Outrageous* offers an opportunity to both grow its ambitions and "play in a new sandbox", according to Perry.

Perfect fit

With UKTV on board, the next step was to plug the finance gap. Enter BBC Studios and BritBox International. Similar to UKTV, both companies tend to favour crime and thrillers, but saw this as an opportunity to "go along for the ride with Firebird", says BBCS head of commercial for drama Kate Woods.

With Firebird part of the stable of BBCS indies, coupled with the producer's "stamp of quality", distributing the show felt like a perfect fit.

Robert Schildhouse, BritBox president of North America and general manager of BritBox International, agrees, noting that *Outrageous* could be a showcase for throwing up "different stories that have an opportunity to reach audiences who haven't given BritBox a chance yet".

Kilgariff says she and Williams spoke a lot on the "why now?" aspect when they started taking it out to broadcasters, latching onto the polarisation of political discourse in today's society. "It feels like the right time to look at this, with the world being unsettled and storm clouds gathering again," she explains.

"The sisters have to choose between family loyalty and their political beliefs, and that's a really ➤

◀ The aristocratic Mitford sisters grew up on a country estate

▲ Shooting a scene with Shannon Watson (Unity Mitford)

"There's something fascinating about six women who all refuse to do what they are supposed to"

Liz Kilgariff
Firebird Pictures

“There’s an energy and sensibility to how it’s being shot and cut that feels fresh and modern”

Helen Perry
UKTV



▲ Above, clockwise:
Jessica (Zoe Brough),
Unity (Shannon Watson)
and Deborah (Orla Hill);
Unity; Nancy (Bessie Carter)

► Opposite page: filming
a scene at a church; Diana
(Joanna Vanderham)
married British fascist
leader Sir Oswald Mosley

complicated thing that’s happening in households across the country,” Williams adds.

Handily, the sisters themselves weren’t typical women of the 1930s. They each fought against their conservative and isolated upbringing, carving out unique paths for themselves. “We talked about it as sort of six *Fleabags*,” quips Kilgariff.

“There’s something fascinating about six women who all refuse to do what they are supposed to, which is marry well and bring money into the family – it’s the rebellion.”

For Woods, the interaction between the sisters and other family members transcends the early

20th-century setting. She notes the contemporary sensibilities of “the opposing views in the family, and how they all got on or didn’t get on”.

Above all, Williams says, the show will speak to younger women discovering their own sense of self. “It’s what we’re all trying to figure out – how should I behave? There’s a big audience for that.”

Tough sell

Despite its modern undercurrent, period drama in the current risk-averse and bottom line-conscious industry remains a tricky sell. It is expensive to make and get right, and global appeal is not guaranteed. There is also the matter of the political persuasions of the Mitford clan, which could potentially prove a turn-off for buyers who need programming to satisfy broad audiences.

With its glossy salaciousness and fictional setting, *Bridgerton* has confirmed the continuing international appeal of British-set period drama, but *Outrageous* is a more traditional take on the genre.



There are no Taylor Swift tunes being played by string quartets nor modern styling of costumes – everything is authentic to the era.

However, Perry is quick to reassure that the series is not dated in tone or style. “There’s an energy and sensibility to how it’s being shot and how it’s being cut that feels fresh and modern – while remaining respectful,” she says.

“They’re not siphons for their politics. You get to know Diana, Unity and Jessica as people, and that’s what makes [their decisions] so powerful.”

Indeed, the commissioner talks up *Outrageous*’ closeness to the sisters’ historical truth in its portrayal, while sprinkling “anarchic cheek” for the modern audience.

Schildhouse underscores US audiences’ love of British period drama as a clear USP in North America and is confident the subject matter will shine in a cluttered scripted market. “The nature of the show and the story itself is different from anything else you find on television,” he asserts.

Given Diana and Unity’s fascist leanings, and Decca’s communist beliefs, the creative partners were acutely aware that any biographical drama would have to tap into the thornier political aspects of the sisters’ stories. At one point, Decca and Unity share a bedroom, each decorating their half of the room with opposing political memorabilia.

Handling controversy

One of *Outrageous*’ explorations is how the theme of family informed these beliefs: how six women could grow up to have such extreme and varying political views, and whether they could still love each other despite it.

“Not all the sisters are likeable – and that’s fine. Nobody’s likeable in *Succession*,” Williams says. “There was a time when all female characters had to be heroines, and the sisters aren’t heroines, but neither are they villains... they’re all shades of grey and a mixture of both, like us.”

Woods admits the radical politics is something to which BBCS is sensitive when pitching the series to potential buyers, though she praises the series for not shying away from controversial topics. “It’s one element of their story, but it’s [a major] part of the real world.”

Kilgariff remarks that audiences will want to see how the sisters ended up with such opposing beliefs, despite their closeness and identical upbringings. “It’s absolutely fascinating to understand how that happened,” she says.

Outrageous is still some months away from TX, but the producers have indicated that series one only scratches the surface of the Mitfords’ story, focusing on the pre-World War II period. Future series would delve further into the differences that ultimately tear the sisters apart as Britain prepares to fight Hitler’s Germany.

Above all, being true to the sisters and their actions seems to be the element that elevates the series. “It’s a true story, these people actually existed,” says Schildhouse. “You almost couldn’t write something that was this outrageous, for lack of a better word.” **B**

PRODUCTION CREDITS

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Firebird Pictures

COMMISSIONER

Helen Perry (UKTV)

LENGTH 6 x 60 minutes

TX 2025, U&Drama;

BritBox International

CREATOR/WRITER/ SHOWRUNNER

Sarah Williams

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

Elizabeth Kilgariff; Matthew

Mosley; Craig Holleworth;

Helen Perry (UKTV);

Robert Schildhouse, Jess

O’Riordan and Stephen Nye

(BritBox International)

DIRECTOR Joss Agnew

PRODUCER Natasha Romaniuk

WHO IS YOUR FAVOURITE MITFORD SISTER?



Sarah Williams

Nancy – because she’s a writer. If you were going to be stuck in a lift with one of them, she would be the most fun.



Liz Kilgariff

Nancy – there’s a wit and warmth about her that’s very appealing. All the others are sort of wonderful, but she’s the one you connect with the most.



Helen Perry

Pam – she was so beyond the societal norm for what a woman should be and did her own thing.



Kate Woods

Nancy – she’s the heart of our story and the heart of the family.