

ITV announces forthcoming Covid-19 drama, **Breathtaking**

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Starring Golden Globe award-winning actress Joanne Froggatt, written by Rachel Clarke, Jed Mercurio and Prasanna Puwanarajah, produced by HTM Television

ITV's Head of Drama Polly Hill has commissioned *Breathtaking*, a searing, thought-provoking and poignant account of an NHS doctor in the eye of the storm during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Filming of the three-part series was completed in Northern Ireland earlier this year.

The drama stars Joanne Froggatt in the role of a frontline hospital consultant. *Breathtaking* is based on doctor-writer Rachel Clarke's unflinching personal

memoir of the greatest public health crisis in living memory, adapted for television by Rachel Clarke and former junior hospital doctors Jed Mercurio and Prasanna Puwanarajah. The drama has been directed by Craig Viveiros (Angela Black, The Watch, The War of the Worlds).

Jed Mercurio commented during filming:

“Everyone at HTM Television has felt privileged to dramatise Rachel Clarke’s hauntingly illuminating memoir of health workers struggling to cope with the extraordinary challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. I’m honoured to have collaborated with Rachel and Prasanna on this important drama, and thrilled to be working with a cast led by Joanne Froggatt and crew led by director Craig Viveiros.”

Commented Craig Viveiros:

“I’m honoured to be working with Jed, Rachel and Prasanna on this timely, important project. After reading the first few pages of the script, I knew this was a project I wanted to be involved with. Its unique, bold and unflinching take on life on the front line during the pandemic was immediately captivating. I’m delighted to once again be working with Joanne Froggatt, her ability to effortlessly bring the humanity and empathy to any character she portrays meant she was the perfect performer to bring Abbey to life.”

Craig continued:

“Shooting a large part of the miniseries in long, real-time sequences should make for captivating viewing and allow the audience to be immersed in the struggles our real-life heroes faced in the wards and emergency departments across the country, day after day, during the pandemic. This story is a chance for their voices and sacrifices to be seen and heard.”

The three-part series is produced by Jed Mercurio’s independent production company, HTM Television, which has been responsible for producing Trigger Point, DI Ray, Bloodlands and the BAFTA-nominated factual drama Stephen.

Powerful and uplifting and written with candour and compassion, Breathtaking (3 x 60’) recounts the devastating impact of the pandemic through the eyes of Acute Medicine Consultant Dr Abbey Henderson, played by Golden-Globe-winning actress Joanne Froggatt (Sherwood, Downton Abbey, Angela Black, Liar). Joanne is also three times Emmy-nominated for her role as Anna Bates in Downton Abbey.

On completion of filming in May Joanne Froggatt commented:

“I feel truly honoured to be playing Dr Abbey Henderson in Breathtaking, based on Dr Rachel Clarke’s beautifully written, poignant and shocking book of the same name. When I first read the incredible scripts they moved me to tears on many occasions. I felt so passionately that I had to be a part of telling this story, the real story, of what was really happening behind the closed doors of the hospitals during the pandemic.”

Joanne continued:

“Our NHS staff are nothing less than absolute heroes in my eyes, and I hope telling this story goes a little way towards us understanding their truth, their lived experience and honouring their unbelievable commitment and sacrifice on behalf of us all.”

Set in a fictional big-city hospital, the drama narrates how frontline medical staff endured fear and frustration as they desperately tried to save the lives of coronavirus patients.

Commented Polly Hill:

“Breathtaking is a heart-breaking account of life as an NHS doctor during the pandemic. It’s a chapter of recent history that should never be forgotten, and I can think of no-one better than Jed, Rachel and Prasanna to write this topical and unflinching drama for ITV.”

A mother of two small children and known for her calm approach in a crisis, Abbey witnesses first-hand the virus begin to take hold, overwhelming the NHS and creating conditions of unprecedented adversity.

The drama is based on Rachel Clarke’s own experiences as a doctor working on the NHS frontline during the pandemic. Rachel is an author of three Sunday Times bestselling books of which *Dear Life* was shortlisted for the 2020 Costa Biography Award. *Your Life in My Hands* documents life as a Junior Doctor working on the frontline. *Breathtaking* was acclaimed as “a searing insider’s account of being a doctor during the tsunami of coronavirus deaths” (The Independent) and “a beautiful, blistering account of a key moment in our history” (Sunday Times).

Commented Rachel Clarke:

“There is so much misinformation and rewriting of history around what really happened inside our hospitals during the pandemic. The truth is, NHS staff gave

everything they had in impossible conditions that sometimes cost them their lives. It is an honour to try and depict the courage and decency of my NHS colleagues on screen, and I'm so grateful to ITV and HTM Television for giving me the chance to show the public the truth."

Against a backdrop of news footage from the early months of 2020, the drama will follow Abbey in her daily work whilst weaving together the stories of her fellow doctors, nurses, patients and the paramedics whose ambulances were queued outside hospitals as the NHS tried to cope with a tsunami of devastating cases. All of human life is present, and in parts it's an uplifting account of resilience and fortitude.

The drama is produced by Brian J. Falconer (Derry Girls, Ordinary Love and The Dig) and executive produced by Jed Mercurio, Rachel Clarke and Prasanna Puwanarajah. Prasanna is an actor, writer, producer and director whose acting credits include Ten Percent, The Crown, Line of Duty and Doctor Foster. His award-winning debut feature film Ballywalter will open in cinemas in the Autumn.

Commented Prasanna Puwanarajah:

"It has been a privilege to collaborate with Rachel and Jed on Breathtaking. Joanne, Craig and the cast and crew brought extraordinary commitment and skill to the work of doing justice to this account of the terrifying and extraordinary realities faced by NHS staff and patients in the COVID-19 pandemic, and we're grateful to HTM and ITV for bringing this untold story to the widest possible audience."

The drama is produced in association with Northern Ireland Screen and filming took place in Belfast from April to May of this year.

Breathtaking is produced in association with and distributed internationally by ITV Studios.

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