



# Midwinter of the Spirit Press Pack

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# MIDWINTER OF THE SPIRIT

BAFTA award-winning actress Anna Maxwell Martin (*The Bletchley Circle*) takes on the role of Merrily Watkins, a single mother who is not your average country vicar in this three-part drama.

Merrily's newly acquired training has put her on the dark side of the pulpit. She has become one of the few women priests working as an exorcist – a job increasingly mistrusted by the modern church and rarely talked about, even though it operates in virtually every diocese in the UK.

Joining Anna will be BAFTA award-winning actor David Threlfall (*Code of a Killer*) who takes on the role of Rev Huw Owen, a deliverance ministry tutor and Merrily's mentor. The series also features Siobhan Finneran (*Downton Abbey*, *Benidorm*), Ben Bailey Smith (*Law and Order: UK*), Leila Mimmack (*Home Fires*, *Becoming Human*), Kate Dickie (*Game of Thrones*, *The Frankenstein Chronicles*), Simon Trinder (*Dalziel and Pascoe*, *Without You*), Oengus MacNamara (*Game of Thrones*, *What If*) and David Sterne (*Tommy Cooper: Not Like That, Like This*).

Merrily is deeply human in her doubts and scepticism, but her knowledge of the paranormal underworld brings her to the notice of local police who need her advice in the investigation of a grisly murder. Merrily has been through the mill emotionally of late, losing her unfaithful husband Sean in a car crash and seeking refuge in a job despised by her 16-year-old daughter, Jane, whose rejection of her mother's beliefs leads her into the path of danger.

When a man is found murdered in the most horrific circumstances imaginable, Merrily becomes convinced that Satanists are operating in the city. In the early hours of the next morning, she is called to Hereford General Hospital to perform an exorcism. The atmosphere is palpably toxic, as nurses treating a chronically ill man known for cruelty to animals and his abuse of women believe that the ward has become polluted by his vileness. As the life force in the shrivelled body begins to ebb away, Merrily feels the force of his depravity. Shaking and feeling violated by her experience, Merrily begins to wonder if the two deaths are connected.

The local police team – DCI Annie Howe (Kate Dickie) and DS Frank Bliss (Simon Trinder) – investigating the murder of the crucified man seek Merrily's expertise. Merrily assists the police as their enquiries take them into a very dark and dangerous world.

*Midwinter of the Spirit* is based on the books written by novelist Phil Rickman and has been adapted by BAFTA award-winning screenwriter Stephen Volk. Directed by Richard Clark (*Doctor Who*, *Whitechapel*), produced by Phil Collinson (*Doctor Who*, *Coronation Street*, *Sea of Souls*) and executive produced by Creative Director, ITV Studios in Manchester Kieran Roberts (*The Trials of Jimmy Rose*, *Blue Murder*, *Coronation Street*).

## Production interview

### Kieran Roberts, Executive Producer ITV Studios



#### Q: How did *Midwinter of the Spirit* develop into a TV drama series?

"A couple of years ago a colleague mentioned a series of books by Phil Rickman. Crime stories but with a big difference featuring a central character called Merrily Watkins. You're always on the look out for something new. So I got hold of the first book - *The Wine of Angels* - and I thought, 'This is really very different.' I contacted Phil Rickman and he said *The Wine of Angels* wasn't ever planned as the start of a series. It was a stand alone book, but later he realised there was something much bigger in the idea than a single book. You get into the real premise in the second story, *Midwinter of the Spirit*, in which Merrily takes on the job of deliverance consultant and finds herself caught up in a murder investigation."

#### Q: Who is the Rev Merrily Watkins?

"Merrily Watkins, played by Anna Maxwell Martin, is a single mother, late 30s, with a teenage daughter. She's recently lost her husband and we discover she found out her husband was having an affair. So Merrily is not only bereaved, she's betrayed. And her daughter has also obviously been damaged by all of this as well."

"So Merrily takes a new parish. She moves from Leeds down to Herefordshire, to this picture postcard parish in the fictional village of Ledwardine and everything seems very rosy. But very quickly we discover it's not."

#### Q: When we first meet Merrily she is training for a new role?

"Merrily has a young, very ambitious and progressive bishop who wants a new deliverance consultant. He thinks the current one is a dinosaur and wants both someone young and fresh and a woman in the post. It's a real job. Every diocese has one. But a job that's rarely been depicted with any level of realism on television or in film."



## Production interview

### Kieran Roberts continued...

“Then the police come knocking on Merrily’s door. They have found a body in the woods and need her help because they don’t know what to make of the nature of the death. They require someone with special religious and spiritual training to advise them. So here is Merrily with a new job, a new parish, a single mother wrestling with all of those complications and suddenly she finds herself caught up in a murder inquiry.

“Phil Rickman did a great deal of research before he set out to write these books and we’ve been working with police consultants and religious advisors. We also have a real deliverance minister advising us. Not only looking at our scripts but coming out on set.”

#### Q: The series explores some dark and disturbing material?

“There is a very interesting scene at the beginning of the first episode where Huw Owen, played by David Threlfall, is talking to Merrily about the dangers of the job. He’s not saying there are ghouls and demons out there. This isn’t a horror film. What he is saying is, there is evil out there. It doesn’t matter whether you believe it or not. The indisputable fact is that some people do believe in evil. Some to the extent where they are prepared to do very dangerous things themselves. They may even be prepared to kill in the name of evil. That is what is going on in the background as part of this story.

“Huw gives a very stark warning to Merrily about the dangers she may face in the job as a relatively inexperienced minister and as a woman. He sets down a real challenge for her. He warns her it will be very difficult and she needs to prove she is up to it. Along the way Merrily will have really big doubts about whether she is. And so, yes, the story does touch on some very unsettling areas.

“In simplistic terms, Merrily is unquestionably haunted during this story. It has something to do with the loss of her husband and finding out he was having an affair and also with a very unsettling encounter she has with a dying man who she is asked to visit in hospital.

“We leave the question open and don’t come down on one side or the other. We don’t say there are definitely things in the world called ghosts. Equally we don’t say there aren’t. We leave the audience to make their own minds up.

“But what’s very important is that Merrily is certainly seeing and sensing things that deeply unsettle her. Whether that’s because of the fragile mental and emotional state of the character, given all she’s been through, or she is being haunted in some properly paranormal sense, is a question we leave open.”

#### Q: Did you speak to your own vicar about the subject?

“Yes. My next door neighbour is our local vicar. He’s a lovely guy and a brilliant vicar. I told him we were filming this and he thought it was a really interesting idea. Merrily has her doubts but she also has qualities of strength, courage and love which are truly Christian.

“One or two people might wonder if we should be going there at all, given these stories touch on aspects of evil some people might find unsettling. I am a church going Christian and I asked myself that question very early on when we were considering adapting the books for television. There is no question the books do take you to unsettling places. But ultimately good triumphs in these stories and they have a really strong moral centre.



## Production interview

### Kieran Roberts continued...

"I personally, as a Christian, feel very comfortable with where you get to at the end of the journey. Even though that journey will feel difficult and dark, which is often the case in religion. Things aren't supposed to be easy. You are expected to confront difficult things, ask difficult questions and sometimes be troubled. But I certainly feel very happy about where these stories go and the moral universe you end up with that anchors them. Certainly in the character of Merrily and others around her."

#### Q: How would you describe the relationship between Merrily and Huw?

"It's one of the terrific central relationships in this story. Huw is her teacher, mentor and guide. Huw is a true believer. He has no question about the existence of God or that there are things out there that cannot be explained.

"Huw has a down-to-earth dry wit about him. He's been there, done it and is not easily impressed. So on the surface he is sceptical and quite cynical. But underneath is this passionate belief. It's an interesting combination.

"So you have the old hand and the young apprentice. Huw gives Merrily a really hard time. It's tough love. He says, 'This is going to be very difficult and if you don't think you're up to it you should walk away now. You're going somewhere very dangerous and dark and you will be a target for those who believe in evil. Even if you don't.'"

#### Q: Tell us about the casting of Anna Maxwell Martin and David Threlfall?

"We're thrilled to be working with them. Once we got into the casting process and it transpired they were both available we got very excited. Anna is such a wonderful actress. I've followed her career and seen pretty much everything she has done. She is deservedly a double BAFTA winner and is putting in an amazing performance as Merrily.

"Anna as Merrily is exactly as I imagined the character to be. There's an incredible intensity about what she's doing, including playing some very difficult scenes with so many different layers to them. Layers of human emotion and dealing with all the baggage in her own life. But also these enormous metaphysical questions that are running around as well. Merrily is wrestling with the job, a nasty crime and a difficult teenage daughter. She's being pulled in so many different directions.

"David is another actor I've admired for so many years. He is just brilliant. It's a privilege to be working with both of them. Their scenes together are absolutely electric."

#### Q: And the casting of rising star Sally Messham who plays Merrily's teenage daughter Jane.

"Sally came to us fresh from drama school and is a real discovery. Our casting directors met a lot of wonderful young actors for the role. They recorded all of the auditions and then I sat down and looked at them. I remember thinking just how good Sally was. So natural.

"As I was watching I was thinking, 'She reminds me of somebody.' Then I realised it was Anna Maxwell Martin. It was uncanny. They really could be mother and daughter. Of course that wasn't the reason we went with Sally. She's an amazing talent and a real find who I'm sure will go a long way. But it was a brilliant added bonus that they really do look like mother and daughter."



## Production interview

### Kieran Roberts continued...

#### Q: Tell us about casting Ben Bailey Smith as Lol Robinson?

"Ben is a fabulous actor who is at a really interesting stage in his career. He was terrific in Law & Order: UK. I was also a big fan of The 4 O'Clock Club, the series he did for CBBC. That was a brilliant show.

"There's a lovely 21st century quality about the way Ben plays social worker Lol. He's made him feel very real and modern. Anyone who knows the original books knows that Lol and Merrily start in a fairly rocky place but eventually get to know each other much better. I really like what Ben is doing with the character."

#### Q: And Leila Mimmack as Rowenna Napier.

"We know Rowenna has some damage in her life. But she seems to be coping well. Rowenna befriends Jane, a teenage girl who has been uprooted from all of her friends and school and had to go and live in this new place. Rowenna is a great friend to her. Or is she? Leila plays that character brilliantly. You completely believe her as that troubled, damaged girl with darker places for her to go in this story."

#### Q: What were the key filming locations?

"We filmed exteriors at Hereford Cathedral and a lot in the city of Hereford. That's very important because the books are set in Herefordshire and we hope to have a long relationship with that part of the world.

"But filming inside the cathedral proved problematical on the very specific days we had to do it and it just wasn't possible. Luckily we were able to film those interiors inside Chester Cathedral which was a very good match. It will look seamless on screen."

#### Q: How would you sum up Midwinter of the Spirit?

"Midwinter of the Spirit works on a number of levels but at the heart of it is a really gripping murder mystery that I hope will have viewers hooked. It's a thriller and a very unusual crime story. But what makes it very special is that at the heart of the investigation of the mystery is this amazing character of Merrily. A single mother, a vicar, a deliverance minister, a very real, believable modern woman who is wrestling with these huge problems with her daughter, job, faith and with this baffling murder.

"It's a very unusual combination. A crime thriller with a supernatural twist which raises some interesting questions about faith and good and evil. There's that quote from Hamlet, 'There are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' That's a very powerful idea. Don't close your mind to things that might be out there. I think it raises some very interesting questions.

"I'm not taking anything for granted but if the audience take to this we would love to do some more. There are 11 further published novels in the series with at least one more on the way from Phil Rickman, who has plans to write beyond that. But the focus at the moment is on making this first story as brilliant as we possibly can."



## Author foreword

### Phil Rickman, author of the Merrily Watkins book series



The 'clerical sleuth' is an appealing idea, but - realistically - how many vicars actually solve crimes? How many get involved with murder more than once?

Also, it's a bit cosy. And while I accept there's a place for cosy, as a writer I've never felt comfortable there - not for long, anyway. Merrily Watkins - self-deprecating, insecure, full of doubt - arrived simply because I had an idea for a rural crime novel, with mystical and folkloric elements, which demanded a woman priest.

That was *The Wine of Angels*, in which Merrily arrives in a Welsh Border village with her teenage daughter, Jane, who rather resents her mum's calling and is more drawn to paganism.

It was only with the second novel, *Midwinter of the Spirit*, that I realised I was looking at something new and edgy, something I could actually believe in. Something entirely contemporary but also close to mystery in the original sense, set on the border between England and Wales but also inhabiting the borderland between psychology and the unexplained.

*Midwinter* (and this is why I suggested any TV series should begin with it) is the novel in which Merrily is appointed Deliverance Consultant for the Diocese of Hereford - what used to be known as Diocesan Exorcist.

Is there such a job? Absolutely. It's something the Anglican Church doesn't talk about much, but there's one in every diocese, sometimes a group of them. The term 'exorcist' was dumped in the final quarter of last century, but the job hasn't altered much at all. I like to think of it as The Bishop's Secret Service. It demands investigative skills and also a sympathetic kind of scepticism.

## Author foreword

### Phil Rickman continued...

I must have talked to about a dozen exorcists over the years. Enough to convince me that a series of crime novels with a *careful* element of the paranormal was entirely valid.

It was, I suppose, what I'd always wanted to write. I'd come in at the tail-end (the forked-tail-end) of the horror-fiction boom, which would eventually collapse into fantasy. I didn't like gratuitous horror and never liked fantasy, never wanted to write about anything I couldn't consider at least possible.

As a radio and TV journalist in Mid Wales and the border country, I'd collected odd stories that you'd hesitate to put into a news report. My first novel, *Candlelight*, was set at the end of the cottage-burning campaign by Welsh-language activists and involved some spooky, indigenous phenomena, the existence of which was still firmly accepted in parts of rural Wales. But, after five supernatural thrillers, I wanted something more authentic, something closer to a police procedural. I wanted to show how exorcists worked in the 21st century in the increasingly-secular UK. The first thing you learn is that the job very rarely involves possible demonic possession - sorry, but no green bile, no revolving heads. Most cases relate to the distress caused by apparent hauntings - some psychological, some harder to explain - and the side-effects of occultism. I'm now working on the 14th Merrily story, and she hasn't yet done what's known

The story at the heart of *Midwinter* is probably the most apocalyptic in the series but is based on documented history and real experiences. The story of the malevolent hospital patient who I called Denzil Joy, in *Midwinter*, was drawn directly from the experience of a former nursing sister, who is spooked by it to this day.

It was obvious that Denzil was going to play an even bigger part in the TV version than in the book where he's more of a hovering presence, part of Merrily's baptism-of-ice as an exorcist. Seems that while sub-plots can add colour and substance to a novel TV doesn't like them. I was dismayed at first to see characters from the book not making it into Stephen Volk's screenplay. Then I realised that a literal adaptation of a fairly complex 550-page novel would have taken about twelve episodes. Later Merrily novels become even more complex and, I think better, as I learned more about what actually goes on, so I'd like to think any future serials could, if necessary, be longer.

It's scary. The advice I had from other writers was 'take the money and run'. But I didn't run and learned a lot - like that it's impossible to pack a thick novel into a few hours of TV without cuts and changes... and that an excellent cast can make you really see your own characters for the first time.

Yes, I've been consulted, introduced the team to a woman priest and an experienced exorcist, made a few observations. I was impressed by the way David Threlfall grilled me - and the exorcist - about the motivations of his character, Merrily's mentor, Huw Owen. I'm convinced David can now actually do an exorcism.

The cast is seriously-excellent. Anna Maxwell Martin even looks and sounds like Merrily did in my head, as does Sally Messham as her daughter, Jane (who, I promise, becomes easier to love as the series progresses.)

I hadn't imagined Merrily's future close friend, Lol Robinson, as mixed-race, but then I've never said he isn't, and Ben Bailey-Smith seems to be underplaying him perfectly: low-key and insecure. In fact, the ethnic roots do fit in well with Lol's previous experience of organised religion, so I'm now wishing I'd thought of that originally.



## Author foreword

### Phil Rickman continued...

One of my favourite characters is Merrily's sardonic CID mate, Frank Bliss. He doesn't have much to do in *Midwinter* but becomes a major character in later stories, and I think Simon Trinder is going to be spot-on.

In the end, it's important to me that this series should be character-led, without too many distracting special effects. This is an area of human experience where nobody is really confident, least of all the priests. There are no super-heroes in this series, and what actually happens is often less important than the emotional impact it has on people. I hope the TV version will get that over... and also show that Merrily Watkins is not there to solve crimes but to reflect a different and perhaps wider perspective.

## Cast interviews

### Anna Maxwell Martin is Merrily Watkins



#### Q: Who is the Rev Merrily Watkins?

“Merrily is a vicar who has just moved from a city parish to a countryside parish in the middle of Herefordshire with a teenage daughter called Jane, played by Sally Messham. Merrily is recently bereaved. Her husband has died.

“When I first read the script I thought, ‘This is a really cracking character. There is so much to her. She is a bit crazy and losing her way.’ Those are the characters I always respond to. The ones that have true foibles and are good and bad. They can be mean and ugly, then nice. She veers in and out of trying to find out who she is and grip on to being a good person of faith. But she is really struggling. That’s what appealed to me about it. I also love her name. Because she’s not merry at all.”

#### Q: Is Merrily is training for a special role?

“Merrily is training to be a deliverance minister. I didn’t know they existed. I thought the author Phil Rickman had made it up. But they do exist and they’re in every diocese in the country. We’ve met one. He’s lovely and is an advisor on the series. A deliverance minister is someone who helps people in all sorts of ways. Not just paranormal activity. It encompasses the mental health sector, social work, psychiatry and a whole load of things.

“So there will be someone in your diocese who can help you if you feel you are struggling with a whole range of problems in your life. They include what may be thought of as some kind of paranormal activity. But that might be explained by your deliverance minister when they get to the root of the problem. It may not be paranormal activity, it might be something else. That’s why it’s a really extraordinary role because it encompasses lots of different ideas and forms of help and aid to people.



## Cast interviews

### Anna Maxwell Martin continued...

"When we first meet Merrily she had been persuaded to go down the line of being a deliverance minister and is undergoing training. David Threlfall, who plays her mentor Rev Huw Owen, has done his research with the advisor but I've done my research via the vicar side. Because it's Huw who is the doyen of deliverance and Merrily is not. She is really struggling to find her way. With deliverance, with her faith, with everything."

#### **Q: Do you believe yourself that these unexplained things may exist?**

"Yes. I'm not a cynic. I'm not really cynical about anything. So I do believe these things can exist. I've never seen anything myself but I have friends who have seen things. Whether that's a manifestation of them being crazy, I don't know. Or whether those things do actually exist. I absolutely believe this is possible. Nothing like that has happened to me but I'm totally open to it. I'm not cynical about it."

#### **Q: Can you describe Merrily's relationship with Huw?**

"Huw is her mentor. He gets to the heart of who she is and he is very straight and honest with her. She doesn't like that at times and they row. But they have a deep affection for each other, although not in any romantic sense."

#### **Q: Does *Midwinter of the Spirit* have a disturbing storyline?**

"It is a serious drama where we ask serious questions. There is a very sensitive subject matter in this and it does have to be handled really carefully. Merrily is confronted with someone she is told is evil. So that is instantly discombobulating for her. She is tested throughout the rest of the story as it unfolds. It explores the nature of good and bad and evil."

#### **Q: Are you able to forget about the dark subject matter of the drama at the end of each day's filming?**

"Oh yes. I've just got a lot of other things to think about. So, no, I don't take it home with me."

#### **Q: Do you think we are more aware of the battle between good and evil in today's world?**

"It's much more prevalent in our minds. Although you have to remember we have stepped away from faith. A hundred years ago most people would have truly believed in some kind of faith. Church was a huge part of community life in a way it is not anymore. Certainly for my grandparents. They were down at church every Sunday and that was absolutely normal. My parents also met at church."

"So in that context good and evil was part of people's lives. But now we have a media based good and evil. And the nature of evil has changed because we're all obsessed with paedophiles, the safety of our children and so on. It's now a media based world rather than a world based in your community and your faith."

#### **Q: Does the series highlight the historical sense of religion battling for light versus darkness?**

"It is trying to show that good will win through. Have faith. Good will win through. If we dispense of our feelings of bigotry and bitterness. If we let forgiveness into our hearts and we lead a good path, don't overly judge people. All of those things. Then good will win out. So there is a strong message."

## Cast interviews

### Anna Maxwell Martin continued...

#### Q: So are you, yourself, a woman of faith?

"Yes, I am. I don't necessarily believe completely in organised religion but I do have faith, for definite. The vicar at my local church in Yorkshire is doing a wonderful job and is a really terrific example of the church. They are packed to the rafters, have a really jolly band, kids are welcome and it's a very open, inclusive community. But there are people there of, I suppose, high church who struggle with that idea. Even so, the fact is churches have to get bums on seats. And it's difficult now for all parishes and lots of vicars. It's difficult to do that."

#### Q: What were your thoughts on playing a vicar?

"I was very keen that the dog collar should be on all the time. It's who she is. Merrily is always on show and it's always clear who she is and what her job is. She has to be available to everyone. That's the point. When you are a vicar in a dog collar you're available to your parish. So on the one hand it's very exposing. And on the other it's a barrier to her own daughter."

"Both Merrily and her teenage daughter Jane are struggling and both are still grieving. That's a huge pressure, especially when there's only two of you in the family. And so because of that they go down a bit of a dark path."

#### Q: Can you believe this is Sally's first TV role after leaving drama school?

"She's more professional than I am. She seems to know exactly what she's doing. I didn't know anything when I started. When I did my first job I didn't understand that thing of them going, 'Set...turning over...action.' I didn't have a clue when you were supposed to start acting. I really didn't know. No-one had told me at drama school. I think Sally did do lots of film work at RADA. But we didn't do anything like that."

"My first film job was called The Hours, directed by Stephen Daldry, and my first scene was with Stephen Dillane. I was terrified and really didn't have a clue. I got to my trailer and I started putting make-up on and fretting about what I was going to wear. I didn't know you were going to be taken to a truck and someone was going to put make-up on for you. And then someone would come in with your costume and be very helpful and nice. Then someone would ask if you wanted breakfast. I had no idea."



## Cast interviews

### David Threlfall is Rev Huw Owens



#### Q: What was your initial reaction when you were approached to play the role of the Rev Huw Owen?

"I thought it was a really interesting world to be a part of and to investigate. Huw Owen is helping to train Merrily Watkins, played by Anna Maxwell Martin, in the deliverance ministry.

"I didn't know anything about deliverance ministers. They are very quiet, unassuming, listening, kind, helpful people who other people call if they have a problem. That could be - in our lay terms - what might be perceived as a poltergeist, a ghost or any of those things. But it's very rarely a problem of personal possession.

"We had our own deliverance minister as an advisor on the drama and I spoke to him. To then learn there was one in every diocese in the country was surprising.

"What was also interesting was that not all people inside the Christian church think it's valid. This is, as I understand it, a divisive thing within the church. Some think people with those kind of problems need a psychiatrist or a social worker. There are those that say, 'They need to go to a psychiatrist because they're bipolar or they're schizophrenic.'

"Whereas, in fact, deliverance encapsulates all of that. These ministers have to be attuned and open to any situation they go into in order to ask the right questions and listen properly. They are saying, 'No, these people need help.'

"The biggest quality you have to have is to be able to listen. And that's a perfect thing for an actor. Because it's sometimes one of the hardest things to do. When you go into a situation you have to be able to listen and be helpful to people, to those that engage with deliverance."

## Cast interviews

### David Threlfall continued...

#### Q: Are you a man of faith?

"Only in terms of Manchester City. We filmed part of Midwinter of the Spirit near the Etihad Stadium in an area of Manchester where I used to live."

#### Q: Do you believe in other-worldly events?

"I think there's energy around of some kind. I've been interested in the way the pre-Christian magic occupied almost literally the power lines, the ley lines in this country. They then were taken over by Christian places of worship. Churches. I find that interesting."

"One of the references I've been reading talks about the sense of astral power. That helps with the unexplained. That might be the energy that's caused a vase to fly off a mantelpiece. That there is some imaginative energy in the room that does create the illusion, even though you swear certain things happen."

There are certain things I would find hard to explain. I'm not unlike a lot of people in that way. Like it was unfathomable for a whole load of people who support Manchester United to understand why they had slipped down the table last season and Manchester City won the Premiership. Again. The unexplainable and inexplicable."

#### Q: Have you ever looked evil in the eye?

"There is a whole discussion here about evil. I found this working on the BBC drama The Ark, for example. The story of the deluge is across all of our cultures. It belongs to all of us. Where did we get so divisive? It just seems crazy. Why do people insist on killing other people? Innocent lives. Because they don't believe in your way of going about your own faith or your beliefs? Religion can lead us into some horrific situations. And I don't dismiss the Christian church from having done that either."

#### Q: You must applaud writers who come up with challenging material?

"Absolutely. It's been nice to be involved with this third ITV drama in a row now after Tommy Cooper: Not Like That, Like This and Code of a Killer. There's a real gold standard about these dramas. It's great that a lot of places are homes for really good and interesting drama."

#### Q: What has it been like working with Anna Maxwell Martin, who plays Merrily Watkins?

"We've come very close to working together before but have never done so until now. It's delightful to work with her. Because the drama has such a dark undertone it's perhaps a bit like funeral parlour directors and people who work in hospitals in that there's a dark humour that goes with it."

"We have a very fun time in making what is at times is a very emotive and serious thing. Merrily's personal journey is actually what Huw is tangential to and, therefore, also understanding of. And he's trying to - if she did but know it - help her with it."

#### Q: How did you approach Huw's Yorkshire accent?

"I worked again with Penny Dyer, who is an old friend and the great vocal coach in this country. I did both Code of a Killer and Tommy Cooper with her. She helped me with the area of Yorkshire that's required for this. And as far as Huw's look goes, he has unusual qualities that are not normally seen in vicars, from what I understand."





## Cast interviews

### David Threlfall continued...

#### Q: What was it like to film in and around Hereford?

“As well as being a lovely market town right on the borders of England and Wales it has possibly something magical about it. Hereford Cathedral contains both a Mappa Mundi and a revised edition of the Magna Carta. There was the original Magna Carta in 1215 and then one revised in 1217 and issued by Henry III. Hereford Cathedral has one of the four surviving copies. So I took the opportunity to go into the cathedral and see both of them. The Hereford Mappa Mundi is fascinating.

“That encapsulates a kind of mystical place, if you were to believe in some kind of ancient magical powers before the Christians arrived. That is maybe why that place was chosen. I don’t know. Doing this kind of work sets you off on that kind of trail. But I’ve not put the sandals on and left home to travel around in a caravan. No. I’ve got too much to look forward to this season with City.”

## Cast interviews

### Ben Bailey Smith is Lol Robinson



#### Q: What was your initial reaction when you were approached about *Midwinter of the Spirit*?

"I was immediately excited. I work quite closely with a similar kind of novelist to Phil Rickman. A writer called Ben Aaronavitch who has a series of very popular books based around the magic world of occult mixed with police procedural. I do readings from them so I was already into that world where a very down-to-earth world meets something other worldly. So when I realised what this was I was excited to be a part of it. Then I met Phil and he knows Ben. So it's a small world. It's just great to be involved."

#### Q: Who is Lol Robinson?

"The other thing that excited me about being a part of *Midwinter of the Spirit* is because Lol and I have a lot of similarities. Lol is a social worker but it's not just a job to him. He does it to give himself a spherical feel to his life because he had a very troubled youth. He's quite a fragile, vulnerable individual and, for him, social work is all about giving something back.

"Lol also has a musical talent and a history in the business that didn't quite work out the way maybe he thought or hoped it would. I can relate to that too. He's an interesting character and not like anybody I've played before.

"What really draws me to him is this duality. He's a strong person because you have to be strong and brave to do the things he does and work with the troubled people he supports. But he's also slightly on edge himself. He's breakable. There's no question about it."

#### Q: Did you talk to the author of the original book, Phil Rickman?

"He told me some fans of the book were saying, 'We're not having a rapper playing Lol. He's got to be into Nick Drake.' I'm an actor. I'm not going to suddenly start rapping mid-scene. I've got to hold on this. And actually my music taste is much more eclectic than you might think.

## Cast interviews

### Ben Bailey Smith continued...

"I'm trying to play Lol as a person conflicted. But not between good and bad or selflessness and selfishness. Just between being strong for other people and the battle that's going on within him in that he knows he's got a number of weaknesses.

"I think that, in itself, is a lovable thing. I don't buy those heroes who have no faults. They're just unbeatable super men and can't be broken. I like the idea of a man who just doesn't know if it's all going to be OK or not but he's going to have a bash."

#### Q: Did you do any of your own research for the role?

"The character of Lol was serendipitous. I come from a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, for better or worse. I have had my own issues in the past that mirror Lol's. I've had very similar experiences in the music industry as a writer wanting to perform and having to see my work taken away from me.

"My mum was a social worker for years and years. I volunteered for her and then went into working with troubled kids at a very young age. I worked with young offenders at Feltham Young Offender Institution. I ran a charity for eight years for children of asylum seekers. All of this before I got into acting.

"So there are many different ways I feel I relate to Lol and I've never had that before with any part I've played. There are lots of different things to touch on. All of which I've had some kind of life experience in. So I've been very fortunate in that respect."

#### Q: How would you describe Lol's relationship with Rowenna, played by Leila Mimmack?

"It's a very difficult relationship in that she is a young woman, still in her teens. She is also very vulnerable and has been damaged emotionally. She's become aggressive and manipulative. Rowenna uses her sexuality as a currency and has become dangerous.

"It's interesting that Lol is perhaps the only one who really sees the vulnerability underneath the front, bluster, toughness and the aggression. Also the manipulative nature of her. She does something to Lol which is unforgivable. And yet he forgives."

#### Q: What is it like working with Anna Maxwell Martin, who plays the Rev Merrily Watkins?

"Anna is one of the stalwarts of British drama. So I was excited to get the opportunity to work with her. Of course you never know what people are going to be like. As it turns out she's lovely, amazing and generous.

"Most of all she is brilliant at what she does. When you have someone like that it makes you better immediately because you've got to try and match it. You can't slack off. Anna is very observant and inside the words. She will say something to me like, 'If you swap these words around in this line it will sound much more natural.' And she's always right.

"So I have a lot of faith in her. Also having read the books it's good to see how the relationship blossoms between Merrily and Lol. I would love it if we can get that far in the story. But we will have to see how the audience take to it first."

#### Q: Have you ever looked evil in the eye?

"Yes, I think I probably have. It's a cop out to call really bad human beings 'evil'. But I've seen some horrible things in my life. I've had a gun pulled on me. I remember looking in the eyes of that person and seeing nothing but coldness. A callousness. It definitely chilled me to the bone.





## Cast interviews

### Ben Bailey Smith continued...

"It was completely out of the blue. I was going out with a girl who lived in Didsbury. So I'd travel up to Manchester from London on the weekends. It happened in Rusholme. A car pulled up and there was a bunch of young guys inside. I was very young myself. About 18.

"The car window came down and this guy asked me for a light. So I turned to him to say, 'Sorry, I don't have a lighter.' And the next thing I knew he had a gun out of the passenger seat pointed at my head. I just completely froze. They all started laughing at me. Then they rolled up the window and drove off.

"So obviously for them it was just like a power trip. I don't even know if it was a real gun or not. But there was no way of knowing. It was terrifying. But evil is a strong word. In retrospect, he had problems. Not problems I personally wanted to solve. I didn't want to give him a hug. I wanted to call the police."

**Q: Has anything ever happened to you that you couldn't really explain?**

"I'm definitely a sceptic about stuff like that but I don't consider myself a cynic. Although I think that's more based on my own cowardice. I don't put myself in a position where I might see something spooky happen.

However, I can't deny I've seen objects in the sky I can't explain. I've seen that twice in my life. I don't think they're aliens, I don't think it's some huge conspiracy or anything like that. I don't think it's ghosts.

"I just think sometimes you see things you're not supposed to see. Who knows what's being developed? I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation for both of those experiences and they haven't changed my view on ghouls and geeks and anything like that."

**Q: You have many strings to your bow. What do you tell people when they ask what you do?**

"I'd love to be able to say I'm an actor. But until you're very successful you don't work all year round. So that's going to be a lie for at least half of every year at present. I think I've relaxed into the idea that I'm an entertainer. I was born to do that. I can't remember ever wanting to do anything else other than entertain people.

"I never trained to be an actor or a musician. I just fell into whatever came my way first. But I can't stop entertaining. If I don't do it I just feel low and like I'm not doing enough.

"I'll keep flitting for as long as I can until one of these jobs says, 'Dude, we need you all year round. You've just got to pack that stuff in.' I postponed my entire stand up tour to film this role. So I'm starting to have to make bigger and bigger decisions.

"My dad used to say to me, 'Never trust anybody who can't describe their job in one word. If they can't do that, it's not a real job.' I take those words on board and say I'm an entertainer."

## Cast interviews

### Siobhan Finneran is Angela Purefoy



#### Q: What attracted you to the role of Angela?

"I was sent all three scripts for *Midwinter of the Spirit* and found the story scary and disturbing. Sometimes you can read something and it has vanished from your mind by the end of the day. But this stayed with me for a couple of days. It was scary reading and that was the appeal of it. When I spoke to the producer and director I said, 'You're not going to make it less scary than it is?' I think viewers will be in for a few shocks.

"I like good drama. That's what appeals to me. A good story, which I immediately recognised in this when I read it. You want to go on that journey with these characters.

"I also loved working with Anna Maxwell Martin (Merrily Watkins) because I'm a huge fan of hers. That was another part of the appeal of doing the job. She's a fantastic actress. Most of the filming was quite near to home, which is always a bonus. I also had beautiful clothes for this role, which isn't always the case for parts I've played. Angela is a very smart woman so they gave me lovely costumes."

#### Q: Who is Angela?

"Angela owns a local restaurant and does a bit of Tarot card reading. She arrives within the story at a time when Merrily's teenage daughter Jane (Sally Messham) is in need of a mother figure. So that's what Angela provides for Jane. She bumps into Jane in the pub and asks if she is OK. I know people like her who get a feeling about somebody and ask if they can help.

"But we don't really know much about Angela and what is going on until later when the full story unfolds. All we know at first is there's something not quite right. The audience might be disturbed by some characters and there will be some surprises.

"As for Angela's Bistro, I did all of those jobs as a young actress in between acting work. Waitressing, bar work, sandwich shops. Anything that was going."

## Cast interviews

### Siobhan Finneran continued...

#### Q: How do you feel about those who claim to have special insight?

"I think some people do have gifts and can see a lot more than you or I can. But whether that means they're just more aware and more sensitive, I don't know. I certainly wouldn't go to one of these people that say they can read minds. None of that interests me."

#### Q: Did you know much about the job that Merrily has trained to do?

"I had to idea there was a deliverance minister in every diocese. I thought there might be about four people in the whole of the country that could go off and do exorcisms and all of that related business. It came as a surprise to me."

#### Q: Some scenes were filmed inside Chester Cathedral. What was that like?

"That was an amazing place to film in. I was sat in the pews as part of the congregation. There's something so atmospheric about being inside a cathedral. We were shooting at night. So apart from getting hysterical and needing sweets at 4am to keep us all awake, it was a memorable experience. It should all look amazing because it felt good and was beautifully lit. It was great fun and nice to have most of the cast together."

#### Q: This is Sally Messham's first job after leaving drama school. Can you recall your very first time in front of the cameras?

"It was for the film Rita, Sue and Bob Too. All I can remember is being totally terrified and not really knowing what anything was or what anybody was talking about. I learned my lines and then I just did exactly what I was told to do. I had no understanding of shots, of what the director of photography or cameraman were talking about at all. But the film lent itself to that. An ITV drama today is very different to that experience almost 30 years ago. Incredible for Sally to come straight out of drama school and land a part like this. She was lovely."

#### Q: Are you superstitious?

"I have the usual ones, like I wouldn't walk underneath a ladder and I won't put shoes on a table. I don't like cats so I'm not bothered whether any of them walk in front of me. But apart from that I'm not particularly superstitious."

#### Q: Having appeared in many dramas, including Downton Abbey and Benidorm, do you get recognised a lot off screen?

"You get recognised in all sorts of places. Often not at the best of times. But people are always so nice that it's fine. I'm usually washing my hands in a toilet or doing my shopping. It's all right. As long as people aren't rude. That's just the way it is if you're a recognisable face from TV."



## Cast interviews

### Siobhan Finneran continued...

#### Q: Do you get time to watch much TV drama?

"I don't. I tend to watch it in bulk. If I miss something I'll watch a box set over a period of time. If I've missed the first couple of episodes of something, I don't try and catch up on it while it's still going out. I'll wait until I can sit and have a couple of days to watch the lot. But you often don't get time. I don't get to sit down in front of the telly before about 10 o'clock at night. I've never been someone who sits down and watches a whole evening of telly."

#### Q: What's next?

"I'm now filming the second series of Happy Valley, which is brilliant. That's me busy until probably just before Christmas. I'm thrilled to be doing that again because it's fantastic telly and Sally Wainwright is a brilliant writer. It's a treat to be working on it."

## Cast interviews

### Leila Mimmack is Rowena Napier



#### Q: Who is Rowenna Napier?

"Rowenna is a young girl who befriends Jane Watkins, the daughter of Merrily Watkins. She is caustic and can be ruthless. Whereas Jane is more reserved and gentle."

#### Q: What was your reaction when you first read the scripts for *Midwinter of the Spirit*?

"I remember being genuinely scared. That's always good when you read something. I was reading it in bed and thinking, 'This is really quite disturbing.' I was interested in seeing how they would bring all of that to life."

#### Q: Can you describe Rowenna's relationship with Lol Robinson?

"Lol is a social worker who brings Rowenna from Salisbury to Hereford. So they have that connection. She appears to be very well settled in Hereford and he is very happy. Because Lol is quite young they can communicate and engage with each other. But then it turns a bit sour."

#### Q: Doesn't Rowenna have a distinctive look?

"She has tattoos so we, obviously, use fake tattoos. I was sat in the make-up chair and they kept dyeing my hair and putting more and more things on, so I was basically turning into my younger sister. Because she's got five tattoos and piercings. I thought, 'This is so weird.'"

#### Q: Do you believe there are things we cannot explain?

"I don't really know. I'm in two minds. My godfather has seen lots of stuff and his stories are really incredible and valid. But I don't know enough yet."

## Cast interviews

### Leila Mimmack continued...

**Q: You filmed outside Hereford Cathedral?**

"That was pretty cool and so beautiful. It's a very peaceful town and a lovely place to film."

**Q: Do you think evil is more visible today?**

"I think so. Because it's documented on such a mass scale for everybody to see on the TV news or whatever. Young people know far too much about horrible things. That would never have happened in the past."



## Cast interviews

### Sally Messham is Jane Watkins



#### Q: Who is Jane Watkins?

"Jane Watkins is Merrily's teenage daughter and they have quite a troubled relationship. Jane's father - Merrily's husband - died a few months before they moved down to Hereford so Merrily could start a new job as the vicar in Ledwardine.

"Jane is still grieving and she wants her mother to grieve too. But Merrily isn't giving her the support and attention she needs. Because Merrily is quite a young mum they're still trying to find out exactly what kind of a relationship they have, which is also very interesting. It's quite an unsentimental relationship.

"Then Jane begins a friendship with Rowenna and also Angela, who gives her a maternal aspect she's been missing in her life."

#### Q: Did you leave drama school to take this role?

"I left RADA to take the role of Jane. It was an easy decision because I'd done the majority of the training and had one term left. I was eager to get out there, start working and put it all into practice. They were very supportive of me doing it. So it was quite a straightforward decision and I'm really lucky."

#### Q: Has the experience of filming a major ITV drama been as you expected?

"I'm still learning, obviously. It's a different environment to the one I'm used to. But I actually found it very stimulating and relaxing. Everyone has been so supportive and lovely to work with. I didn't know how dark the story was going to be until I read it and started working on the production. But I'm having a great time."

## Cast interviews

### Sally Messham continued...

#### Q: What's it like to have Anna Maxwell Martin as your screen mother?

"It's a bit of a dream, isn't it? It's still sinking in. I've watched her in many things so I was really excited. She's great. We have good argument scene, among others. It was lovely to have the rehearsal time with her, as well. To get to know her a bit better and talk about the relationship between our two characters."

#### Q: Have you ever had an experience you could not explain?

"Not myself but family members have told me stories about their experiences. I do believe there is something out there. It hasn't happened to me, personally, but I definitely think there is something there."

#### Q: What has it been like working with Siobhan Finneran, who plays Angela?

"She's like a chameleon. A lot of my first scenes were with her and you do get drawn in by her characterisation. Her character is so warm but also manipulative. It was amazing working with her, but also scary because she is so convincing in those scenes. You're mesmerised by her presence, which is good for my character. She's also hilarious. There's a lot of humour on set when we're not filming."

