

KENNY SMITH REVEALS THE FIRST OF THE BIG FINISH ORIGINALS WILL BE HIGHLY FLYING. ADORABLE, BUT FOR THE LADIES IN THE STORIES, IT WON'T ALWAYS BE...



PLANE SAILING

IN JANUARY, Big Finish Productions revealed its exciting plans for 2018, with the announcement of a number of original dramatic series. The **Big Finish Originals** range features a number of brand new series, which get underway with **ATA Girl**, a drama inspired by the real women of the Air Transport Auxiliary during World War Two. These brave female pilots, alongside the men, transported a vast range of aircraft from the factories to the squadrons,

often flying in perilous weather conditions and without radios or instrument instruction. One in ten ATA pilots died. Told as a series of reminiscences from (fictitious) former pilot Amelia Curtis, the stories aim to honour these unsung heroes of WWII. **ATA Girl** was conceived by Louise Jameson, and uniquely, the series has not only been devised by a woman, but all four plays have been written by women, directed by a woman (Louise), and produced by a woman (Helen

Goldwyn). Big Finish senior producer David Richardson says: "Louise Jameson mentioned **ATA Girl** to me ages ago – and it was a couple of years ago when we started to have concrete discussions about making it as part of our **Big Finish Originals** range. It's such a lovely piece of work – I'm a fan of wartime dramas like **Tenko** and **Secret Army** anyway, and this fits right alongside them. It's been a privilege to stand from a distance and watch it blossom with such talented and creative



Above (l - r): Helen Goldwyn and Louise Jameson

eight women involved initially, under the command of Pauline Gower. They had no radar, no ammunition, nothing – and often they had never flown that kind of aircraft before. If you want a modern analogy, it

“THEY HAD NO RADAR, NO AMMUNITION, NOTHING – AND OFTEN THEY HAD NEVER FLOWN THAT KIND OF AIRCRAFT BEFORE.”

LOUISE JAMESON



Above: John Dorney



Above: Lydia Piechowiak

people involved. Lou and Helen and the team have done a brilliant job." Louise says: "I'm so excited by this – I've been living with it for 10 years. I had originally proposed it as a television series, but you then hit questions of finance, like, 'Do you know how much it costs to get a Spitfire off the ground?', and so on.

"I was telling David Richardson about it, so he invited me to pitch it as an idea, and the very next day Big Finish came back to me and said, 'Yes, please.' "The series is about the Air Transport Auxiliary, who were the pilots who delivered planes to the front lines. There were

would be like learning to drive in a Fiat 500, and then being given the keys to a Ferrari! "They would be handed a small notebook, called *The Bible*, and in it would be one page of instructions for each type of aircraft. "Sadly, one in 10 of the female ATAs died. They were all between the ages of 17 and 32 – all young women. Some were mothers, some were debutantes and others were land girls. It really crossed the classes, and you had Americans and Canadian volunteers coming over as well. There were so many wonderful characters, and a fantastic cross-section of women from the day." Producer Helen agrees: "It's come at a very auspicious time, with the issue of female equality being such a hot topic at present. "And it's incredible what all this female energy has produced. For me, it's been a great success story and the feeling around it is so different from what I've experienced before. It's a great



Above: Helen Goldwyn

“Each memory is a self-contained drama but we can jump around all over the place. Even if someone is killed off, and we really like the character, we can go back and tell a story before that happened.”

Helen adds: “When it came to casting, we were talking about all of the talented actors we know who normally don’t get a look in.



Above: Alicia Ambrose

example of how forward-thinking and inventive Big Finish is. We know we can write things such as fantasy and science fiction, but this is a new market, and it’s a bit of a gamble in many ways.

“But we’re confident we can create an audience – Big Finish has such a great, positive attitude and lots of ambition.

“This whole new strand of original drama was, I suppose, inevitable, with all of the skills and creatives within Big Finish who are so used to writing and producing great drama. It makes sense to try and extend that, to reach out to everyone else in the population.

“When I talk to people about Big Finish, they ask if it’s audiobooks, and I say, ‘Yes, kind of, but it’s so much more than that. It’s like movies without the pictures.’”

EXPLAINING THE format of *ATA Girl*, Louise reveals: “As a team, we decided we would set each story in the past, but bracket it with some present day scenes. We have an older woman in her 90s (an ex ATA pilot), her daughter, who I play, and my daughter. So we have three generations of the one family, slipping back through the years. Their story remains linear.

We had a selection of people who we had worked with, and from them we knew we needed some distinctive voices, especially people who had a sensibility for the era.

“It was important these actors were as passionate about it as we were, who were interested in the characters and the settings, who would invest them with their enthusiasm, and that’s exactly what we got.”

The series begins with *Up in the Air* by Gemma Page, as young widow Daphne Coyne arrives at the Air Transport Auxiliary, having signed up to train as a new pilot. The second story,

ATA GIRL
Big Finish Originals

OUT THIS MONTH
DOWNLOAD: £15.00
EXTRAS INTERVIEWS

DIRECTED BY: Louise JAMESON
STARRING:
Alicia AMBROSE-BAYLY
Anna ANDRESEN
Matt BARBER
Nathalie BUSCOMBE
Kate COPELAND
Helen GOLDWYN
Louise JAMESON
Claire WYATT

UP IN THE AIR BY Gemma PAGE
DANCING WITH A SPITFIRE
BY Victoria SAXTON
FLYING BLIND BY Helen GOLDWYN
GROUNDIED BY Jane SLAVIN

Louise says: “Helen has been a dream producer to work with and she’s also one of our writers. Her first draft was so good, it was virtually what we went into studio with. She has been so dedicated to it.”

Helen continues: “This has been such a huge project for me, having taken it on. David Richardson said that: ‘As producer, you have a responsibility to it, but it won’t take up months of your time.’

“However, because it is historical and with the nature of it, I was determined that it was going to be historically accurate – and that meant weeks and weeks of research for all of the writers.

“Even if I hadn’t been writing one of the episodes, I’d still have felt that I’d have to come to the project as knowledgeable as the writers so



Above: Jane Slavin

of history that has ever consumed me, but there is always more and more to learn. For this project, rather than researching the pilots, I listened to hours and hours of audio archives from WWII, covering the blitz, rations, everyday life, you name it. The Imperial War Museum is just the best archive ever.

“I also listened to audio books (factual) and I bought a ton of the diaries written during the war for the ‘mass observation’

“I LISTENED TO HOURS AND HOURS OF AUDIO ARCHIVES FROM WWII”

JANE SLAVIN



Above: Lucy Pickles

we could honour the stories of these brave women. I want there to be no, or as few mistakes as possible. I think we’ve all done our best.”

This series concludes with *Grounded* by Jane Slavin, as the end of the war is closer than the pilots realise, but there are losses still to come...

Jane admits she threw herself into the research: “It’s the only period

project, really to get a feel for life during that time. I found old perfumes and sniffed them and cooked food from rations. I really loved it. The whole experience.

“Throughout the research, when I got an idea for a scene or a moment or a character, I would scribble it down on an index card and then at the end of a month I put the cards together and tried to



Above (l - r): Helen Goldwyn and Louise Jameson

knit a life out of it. My knowledge of the ATA was limited but my knowledge of loss and love and longing and despair is vast, and that's what I drew on. My episode is the only episode that sees all the pilots grounded. Every single person walks into the episode entirely entrenched in their own war. They are all enormously different. It was thrilling to live with those characters for the time it took to write the script. Also it was thrilling to actually bring one of them to life, and hear it for the first time out of my actual head and in studio.

"It was an extraordinary time and I'd do it again like a shot."

Louise says: "Our problem with this series isn't what to include, but what we had to leave out. We didn't want to cram everything into one hour. We had so many ideas, and hopefully people will like it and there will be more stories to follow.

"I'm confident it will appeal to everyone, with something for people of both sexes. At the risk

“I REALLY BELIEVE IN THIS AS A SERIES – AND THAT’S NOT ME JUST DOING THE PR SPEAK...”

LOUISE JAMESON

of sounding sexist – which I don't mean to! – there's the excitement of the planes, all the backdrop of World War Two drama, as well as the romantic side of things, and how these women bond in adversity. In many respects this has reminded me of doing **Tenko**.

"It's like a family. At the end of the four days of recording we went into the green room, and all of the actors burst out in applause, which I've never known

before. We were so thrilled.

"I really believe in this as a series – and that's not me just doing the PR speak – because we're talking about situations real people lived through, and we're being respectful to that.

"People weren't nice to each other all the time – sometimes they would steal from others, or they would call each other names behind their backs, or have affairs with married men. It's very, very real."



Above: Claire Wyatt

Helen concludes: "It was such a remarkable experience, I've never had a week like it before because everyone was just so committed. People were even getting tearful about it, and talking about the potential.

"Hopefully it will take off, as it would be interesting to see where we can take it. I'm hugely proud of it. I've just listened to episode one, and the work sound designer Iain Meadows has done is brilliant." **VORTEX**