

Podcast “Filming in Portugal. See the big picture”

Transcription of the episode 10 with Rita Ataíde Novais

[00:00:14 Martin Dale]: So I'd like to welcome everyone to this episode of “Filming in Portugal. See the big picture”, a podcast of the Portugal Film Commission. I'm the host, Martin Dale, a corresponding journalist for *Variety*. And in this episode, we're delighted to have Rita Novais to speak with us. Rita is development producer at BBC Studios Productions. She's been working with the BBC since 2020, where she's focusing mainly on production for kids and family, focusing primarily on animation. She's going to explain better what she's doing. Rita is Portuguese, but she's been based in the UK and since 2020 at the BBC. So we could start, Rita, in terms of your career trajectory. How did you end up working at the BBC, being Portuguese? If you could tell a bit about your experience based in the UK and the different steps you've been taking.

[00:01:12 Rita Ataíde Novais]: Thanks, Martin, for the introduction. So, I've entered the world of animation when I decided to study a BA in animation at London College of Communication at the University of Arts London. And since then, I've been working with commissioned work. First as a freelance animation director. And at the end of my second year at university, I entered the TV animation sector with an internship at the Walt Disney Company, working in the Disney channels and Disney Plus TV series. And since then, I've been growing production skills and portfolio in the TV animation sector, having joined BBC three and a half years ago.

[00:02:15 Martin]: Excellent. And had you been based in Portugal before doing the studies and when did you move to London for this first course?

[00:02:23 Rita]: I moved to London in 2016. I was previously based in Berlin, where I did short courses in arts and film. And I decided to do animation because I thought it combined the storytelling side that I was so keen to develop, but also an artistic side, having developed skills in drawing that I wanted to apply in filmmaking. So, I applied to universities in the UK that I knew had the excellence in the animation field that I was looking for and decided to move to buzzing London and immerse myself in the arts world as well as the TV world.

[00:03:21 Martin]: That's excellent. And in terms of your experience in Berlin, was that... I mean, you're obviously Portuguese, but you've also had some growing up and studying in Portugal before going to Berlin, or has your experience been mainly international? If you could talk a bit, just so I get a sense of your trajectory.

[00:03:42 Rita]: I moved to Lisbon when I was 15 years old and decided to study in the Conservatoire of Music for my last two years of secondary school. In that environment, I was able to develop different artistic skills, obviously with a focus in music, but it was a really open space for me to try out some filmmaking and artistic skills that I wanted to develop. And I had an idea that I wanted to do film at some point. So that was the start of my desire to explore that field.

[00:04:31 Martin]: And in terms of your experience between having worked at Walt Disney and now at the BBC, Disney obviously being a more commercial, both of them are very international. Both of them are very interested in having productions that work in a domestic but also an international market. But what have been some of the big differences you felt between those two environments?

[00:04:58 Rita]: It's an interesting thought seeing the BBC has a non-commercial entity. It is a public sector broadcaster. However, being at BBC Studios Productions, I very much wear a commercial hat. So, my experience at Disney has definitely fed into my growth at the BBC and into the projects we've developed and produced in the past year since joining the commercial branch of the BBC.

[00:05:36 Martin]: And if you could explain a bit as a development producer, that means you're, if you could explain a bit what that involves, you're focusing, I presume, at the development stage of new projects. But are you also accompanying the production stage? If you could explain a bit what a development producer, what you do.

[00:05:55 Rita]: Of course. A development producer looks at projects from the seed stage when they're just an idea. These ideas can come from writers, visual artists, established directors as well as upcoming ones, from in-house producers and from external studios that have developed their own ideas. That's the first step of development, is selecting those ideas that have potential to grow into long-form TV series.

Then a development producer brings those ideas to an official development phase where a pitch Bible is developed, meaning the concept is really fleshed out with a series statement, character descriptions, world descriptions, developing both the writing side as well as the visual style of the show. If possible, there are scripts that accompany that stage and the scripts are really helpful to identify the tone, the level of comedy, the type of humor and the style of the series that's being proposed.

After this pack of materials is developed, we go into the market and pitch the ideas to potential partners, from broadcasters to other animation studios and production companies, who could work with us on the project. That stage then develops into a bigger development phase where different partners are involved and broadcasters will want to further develop the series with a pilot episode, animation tests and more detail into the writing of the concepts. Once it hits green light, meaning that the series is fully funded and can enter production, a development producer will make sure that it carries over to production in a seamless way.

In my role, I have stepped into production to support different stages. I've previously been in writers' rooms in production or voice recordings. Phases of production are especially key at the pre-production stage before entering a full animation production mode. At the moment, I'm seeing that my role will develop to a production role as well. So, the development side will be combined with a production side to my work.

[00:09:12 Martin]: That's great, wonderful. And if you could explain, obviously the productions that you've been developing, things that are not yet announced have to remain confidential. But in the period that you've been at the BBC since 2020, are there productions, I would think it's likely there are productions that you've developed but then have gone into production that you can talk about. I don't know if you can give any examples to give a sense of titles, the number of episodes in the series, the type of animation... If you could give one, two or three examples so that I understand what type of productions we're talking about.

[00:09:54 Rita]: Of course. I must say animation takes its time to be developed and produced. You can see productions running for two years and being developed for even longer. So, there are quite a few projects that are not out there, nor have been announced. But two of the in-house productions titles that I've been previously involved in are *JoJo & Gran Gran*, which is a CBB's production, and *Soup Potato*, a CBB's and Ten Cents in China co-production. Those two

titles have a couple of seasons each and they are still in production. They are both still in production at BBC Studios. Both these projects are preschool 2D animated shows. *JoJo & Gran Gran* has also live action inserts.

I've been mainly developing in an older kid space and even reaching the young adult space. This is a section of animation that the BBC Studios has been keen to develop further. We have a repertoire in preschool animation that is robust and well known. Two of our top brands are *Hey Duggee* and *Bluey*, other 2D animated preschool shows. We are now expanding further into an older space while still using 2D techniques. We have a few projects that aim to be produced in CGI, and those are part of our strategic goals of growth in the animation department.

[00:12:07 Martin]: And you yourself, you mentioned how during the study stage, the fact of the hand drawing of pictures and the animation, presumably you're interested in all stages from hand drawn animation through to CGI. Obviously each project has its own characteristics, dynamic... If you could talk a bit about the different types of animation that you particularly enjoy or whether you have very much a diverse set of interests, if you could talk a bit about that.

[00:12:44 Rita]: When I consider animation, I see the wide range of techniques it can incorporate. To me, a core story, a core visual style are the things I look for when looking at projects and watching animation. I don't differentiate as much between the different techniques.

When I put my commercial and production hat on, I do consider techniques. 2D animation has different pipeline models and costs to CGI animation. Stop motion, for example, is a very specific type of animation that does cost more in long form, but we know that there have been really successful series in this technique, and we hope that they continue to grow. During my studies, I experimented with stop motion animation. I find that a tactile technique can bring hidden meanings and emotions that digital ones may not be able to reach. So, for my final year at university, I directed a short three-minute film all made in laser-cut wood. Wood was very important to the concept as it focused on a table, a wooden table and the friendship that it held on to.

[00:14:35 Martin]: This was, if you could just interrupt, that's the *Chopping Wood Chips*, is that right? The short film that was showed at the Bilbao International Festival.

[00:14:43 Rita]: That's right. *Chopping Wood Chips* was the short I developed and directed during my studies. And that was an experiment of storytelling and a very unusual stop motion technique.

[00:14:58 Martin]: And if you could explain a bit, it was unusual in what way, the stop motion?

[00:15:06 Rita]: *Chopping Wood Chips* is all made in laser cut wooden pieces. The technique is often called replacement animation. The co-director on that short film, Alize Sotelo and I developed a style in 2D animation and translated it into wooden pieces with the use of a laser cut machine. We then shot those pieces in stop motion and that became *Chopping Wood Chips*.

[00:15:46 Martin]: And if you could talk a bit... That sounds a great experience. You mentioned at the BBC Studios Productions, the range of projects vary from preschool through to young adults. You personally, is there any particular subject matter, age group, in terms of... Again, there must be projects we can't talk about, but in terms of areas, if you could talk a bit about what you find particularly interesting and challenging in terms of what one can achieve with animation.

[00:16:28 Rita]: I find when developing and producing an animated concept that the core human relationships of that concept are the driver of any story that can come from it. And these human relationships can be explored for preschool age all the way to young adults and wider families. I very much see all that I develop and produce has content to appeal to families.

Producing preschool doesn't mean that it needs to be solely for preschool audiences to watch. We hope that the heart, the humor, the charm of that content can appeal to parents and even to others who may not be in close contact with kids. And there is a human experience in it that anyone can enjoy. So, age groups are important when thinking about the broadcasting slots available, the opportunities in the markets to define a language and tone for each concept. But what inspires me when thinking about ideas for this wide range of ages is the core human relationship that is driving them.

[00:18:14 Martin]: And again, having you mentioned that your interest in animation goes from very complex technological projects to more traditional animation. Could you talk a bit about some of the new technological developments in animation and how that's affecting your work as a development producer? So, things like, I don't know if you've had any projects with real time animation. Or obviously the big question of artificial intelligence, which has multiple forms that it's modifying the animation industry. If you could talk a bit how these technological developments are being incorporated into your work.

[00:18:59 Rita]: Of course. We have a wide range of projects in different techniques. The new techniques being developed are very much at the forefront of different animation studios we work with. To clarify, BBC Studios Productions does not have an in-house animation studio, so we can always collaborate, we always collaborate with external parties when it comes to animation production. That means that animation studios that are experimenting with real-time engine or with AI generation within CGI tools or with AI generation for lip sync in 2D sitcom shows are the types of techniques we want to access.

We still very much value the human interaction of TV production. And in animation, it is very important to be able to speak to human artists and writers and the crew. And we very much see GenAI still being a tool that's being developed. The future will bring changes to productions and the pipelines that we know. But traditional pipelines will... traditional models of productions will definitely evolve with the new tools and GenAI softwares being developed. But we will need to accompany as the companies introduce them within their production models.

[00:20:56 Martin]: But do you feel, I mean, the whole topic of artificial intelligence, there are a lot of kind of doomsayers talking about negative possible consequences. But when it comes to post-production, for instance, whether it's in animation production or traditional film and TV production, it also opens up a huge number of new opportunities and possibilities. I'm just curious, are you enthusiastic as you're seeing these possibilities or you're more cautious? How do you see in your very specific area of activity? Not talking about the bigger picture in terms of artificial intelligence on society, but when it comes to animation, are you enthusiastic or what are your feelings about the possibilities that are being created?

[00:21:47 Rita]: I'm quite optimistic about the new tools being introduced in animation and gaming production that will facilitate the work of artists and crew members. There is still a lot of unknown consequences to new GenAI models in the whole TV sector. But currently there have been a lot of conversations about how it will become part of productions, how legal considerations will need to be part of our policies and strategies moving forward. And those conversations have been very positive.

And there is going to be change in how productions are made. Crews will likely continue working with the tools that GenAI offers, but in very different ways. We are left with question marks at this stage, but I am positive that with the right conversations and the right introduction of useful tools from GenAI models, that productions will continue to create fulfilling artistic outcomes.

[00:23:21 Martin]: I agree. Thanks very much. In terms of these kind of topics and other topics are addressed in some of the important different meetings and forums that exist. And I believe you recently went to the Move Summit, which is kind of Scotland's animation gathering, animation forum. There are other important events I presume you go to during the year. If you could talk a bit about the Move Summit and other important meetings, forums that you attend internationally and the experience you get from them and how that's helping in disseminating information about the different subjects we're talking about.

[00:24:06 Rita]: Industry events and conferences are fantastic to share innovation within the sector, to share experiences. And Move Summit was a really refreshing conference. I met with creatives emerging from Scotland, met with established directors such as Troy Quane, who co-directed *Nimona* and is up for an Oscar maybe. And these forums allow a lot of sharing of information from a production point of view, but also from a creative point of view. So, it brings inspiration to projects that we may be working with and potential collaborations in the future.

Other industry events I attend on a regular basis are Annecy and the MIFA market, the biggest animation festival. The Cartoon Forum Conference, currently in Toulouse, that's a model of an industry event based in pitch sessions. We were invited to pitch last September. And there is a real sense of collaboration between different European countries to make animation happen. The sole purpose of Cartoon Forum is to incentivize co-productions. And that feeling of collaboration is very much what that event inspires.

In the past, I've attended other types of festivals. Some in a more creative fashion, such as Pictoplasma in Berlin or Manchester Animation Festival. They include conferences that inspire new ideas. They include networking events where we get to meet new directors, writers, studios. And we very much see those moments as the start of future collaborations. And I can say that currently we have seen fruits coming from them.

[00:26:38 Martin]: And as you mentioned, since BBC Studios Productions, you don't have in-house animation, so you're effectively working with independent production companies on a regular basis. And they're not just based in the UK. You mentioned the co-production also involving China. In terms of the continental Europe, are there projects also with continental European producers? And in terms of overall... You have to keep pretty much abreast of what's going on in terms of independent production internationally, I presume.

[00:27:17 Rita]: Yes, part of the job is to keep up to date with new commissions, productions underway, launches, festivals, award seasons and co-productions. Co-productions is at the core of the TV sector. In order to fund projects, we need to collaborate between companies but also between different countries. We very much look at European co-productions as a business aim and we are developing that strongly at the moment. International co-productions with East Asia, South America, Australia, Canada and the US are very much at the forefront of animation.

[00:28:16 Martin]: You gave examples, what about continental Europe, obviously, France, Spain, there are also big production centers. The focus has been more on the brief list you gave, more outside that area, but are there also potentially co-productions with countries like France and Spain and Germany?

[00:28:44 Rita]: Absolutely. There is currently a focus in strengthening co-productions with continental Europe. France is a key territory for animation production, and we have worked with France in different projects and currently we are working with France.

In Germany, several broadcasters have also commissioned projects by BBC Studios productions, and we continue to strengthen relationships with them. Italy, Spain, have key broadcasters we also work with at different levels. And there's a continued search to work with studios that are spread across continental Europe, from Finland all the way to Portugal, hopefully.

[00:29:52 Martin]: And obviously mentioning Portugal since the podcast is coming from Portugal and you are Portuguese. In Portugal, given questions of economies of scale, there aren't really examples of big animation series coming from Portugal. Sometimes as a small minority co-production partner, but Portuguese animation has won some important prizes and achieves more in the niche area of the independent animation. But do you accompany what's going on and are there any particular projects that have caught your interest?

[00:30:29 Rita]: I do, and it is a goal I personally have to continue fostering relationships with heads of studios in Portugal, both in the independent and more commercial sector of animation. As you mentioned, the economics of scale aren't at the level that we are used to work in at BBC Studios, but there is definitely an aim to work with countries such as Portugal and be able to work out a potential co-production in the future. The way I approach it is to meet producers in Portugal and exchange feedback, exchange advice on how to develop visual styles, TV series concepts and pitches with an international market in mind.

[00:31:37 Martin]: And I'm curious also just as well, while we're on the topic of Portugal and being Portuguese, there's been, I think, growing awareness in the UK of Portugal on multiple levels, whether it's football, of people like Ronaldo, or obviously tourism has increased to a big level. There's also this kind of historic alliance between the two countries. As a Portuguese person working in the UK, working in London, have you... experience people talking about their experiences with Portugal or the fact that there is an old friendship between the two countries? I'm curious about your experience as a Portuguese person in the UK.

[00:32:19 Rita]: The UK is known for its flourishing creative industries, and that's what attracted me here from the first place. In London, there is a vast international community. So my Portuguese identity is not what drives collaboration or the creative career that I've developed in London. However, there's definitely cultural sensibilities that I bring to my work that come from my Portuguese identity. And those are very much welcomed in any environment I've worked in so far. I find that the animation and TV sectors have been very inclusive in bringing different cultural perspectives to the workplace and to the content being made. And as a Portuguese person working for one of the most British corporations known worldwide, I felt that my voice has been heard as any other, and there's definitely been a spirit of collaboration and inclusivity.

[00:33:42 Martin]: And just on the question of inclusivity, in Portugal there was recently a study about women working in the film and audiovisual sectors and areas where there could be improvement in terms of ratios of women as directors and producers. I think there have been huge strides in developments in Portugal. I think in the UK it's very much an inclusive atmosphere, but do you feel it's fully inclusive or are there any constraints as a woman working in the animation industry? Do you think that there's any further improvements that can be achieved?

[00:34:18 Rita]: I can speak to my experience coming into the TV animation sector. I joined Animated Women UK in 2019, which was a forum that really helped me springboard into the future roles I took. In that forum, I felt women in the industry supported each other at different levels and that the hierarchy wasn't as strong as a recent graduate thought it would be. That definitely helped me grow as a woman producer in the sector. And there's been champions, both female and male, that have allowed me to grow without a sense of being discriminated in gender.

[00:35:23 Martin]: Excellent. And very much you seem to be obviously focused on what you're doing immediately. In terms of ambitions and looking ahead, your main focus is now and will continue to be animation. Are you also interested in other sectors? In terms of animation itself, what kind of goals and ambitions do you have? As I say, you're mainly focused on what you're doing now, but it'd be interesting to hear as a sort of rounding off our discussion, what some of ambitions you have for the future.

[00:36:03 Rita]: Yes, so the future holds a lot of unknowns and we spoke about GenAI and what it will bring, the different models of productions that could bring and I aim to upscale in order to adapt to those new models. I also am expanding into live action developments. I'm very interested in approaching the TV sector in its range, formats, genres and mediums. In the long run, I'd love to get into feature film productions. I have a desire to be able to bring more productions to my home country, Portugal, either on an animated series level, feature films or even live action feature. And that's something that I very much see as a life goal to be able to produce from Portugal at some point.

[00:37:14 Martin]: So potentially you see yourself working between the UK and Portugal or that's definitely different possibilities are open for you.

[00:37:23 Rita]: Yes, I have traveled and lived in different countries in my lifetime. So, I see very much the collaboration between different countries such as France, Germany, the UK, Portugal, Spain has been the very key foundation of any future project. It has very much a commercial ignition. We will be able to create more productions with funding collaboration from different parts of the world. But having that desire of bringing that funding in combination with what Portugal can offer is very much something I look forward to do at some point in my life.

[00:38:17 Martin]: And this is very much my last question. Having seen in Portugal, there's been increasing support at different levels and there's been this Cash Rebate scheme that also is attracting animation productions. For economies of scale, I presume it hasn't really triggered the interest at the level of the productions you're doing at the BBC Studios productions. But do you think Portugal is a bigger potential partner than it was a few years ago? You think it's more moving in that sense? As a Portuguese person, but looking from outside, how do you see the potential of productions and co-productions with Portugal?

[00:39:02 Rita]: I think the marketing of the financial benefits of productions in Portugal have definitely reached the UK and there is interest in producing with Portugal and in Portugal. However, the editorial is very much the key point in question.

And it's not as much the economics of scale, which can be developed quickly with the right talent and crew members, but it is mostly the editorial side that needs further development. And that's where I feel I can further support and where relationships with established producers in Portugal can be fostered.

[00:39:49 Martin]: Wonderful. Well, Rita, I think we've covered some of the main topics. It was a fascinating discussion. I don't know whether there's anything else you feel you'd like to share, but I think we've covered the key issues.

[00:40:03 Rita]: I think, speaking to that point of editorial development, I believe Portugal has a real, I believe Portugal has very particular sensibilities in visual storytelling and these could be further explored in animation, film, live action TV...

I'm very eager to find ways to bring those sensibilities to a commercial level that it can attract international partners such as BBC Studios. So, I just wanted to share that those editorial points can definitely be developed with the wonderful talent that there is in Portugal.

[00:40:56 Martin]: Wonderful. Well, Rita, thank you ever so much for your time with us. So just to conclude, we were speaking with Rita Novais, who's development producer at BBC Studios Productions. I thought that was a wonderful discussion and thanks ever so much for your time.

[00:41:12 Rita]: Thank you so much, Martin.