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**TELEVISION SITCOM PRODUCTION AT THE BBC 1973-1984:
AN INTEGRATED APPROACH**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the University of
Westminster for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Between 1973 and 1984 BBC Television produced and transmitted a number of popular situation comedies. These were designed to be light-hearted, inoffensive entertainment, but they nevertheless explored, reflected and reinforced changing public attitudes to private sexual behaviour.

Central to the emergence of these series at this time was the ethos of the BBC's Light Entertainment Department under the successive leadership of Bill Cotton and James Gilbert. They espoused and developed attitudes of creative excellence, competitive success and benevolent patronage, and took a liberal, non-polemical, middle-brow approach to material.

The thesis adopts a multi-faceted approach to reveal the relationships between the individual contributors and the public feedback for four of the most successful series: *Are You Being Served* (1973-1985), *The Good Life* (1975-1978), *Butterflies* (1978-1983) and *The Young Ones* (1982-1984). It concludes that their central creative impulse initially came from the four writer-producer teams: David Croft and Jeremy Lloyd; John Esmonde, Bob Larbey and John Howard Davies; Carla Lane, Sydney Lotterby and Gareth Gwenlan; and Rik Mayall, Lise Mayer, Ben Elton and Paul Jackson.

These four series offered audiences a range of comedic situations, namely: a fading department store, an ecologically-aware suburban household, a more traditional suburban household and a student flat in a large metropolitan city. Audiences had several points of identification with the various characters and were able to adjust their own individual attitude to the private sexual behaviour of the characters, thus allowing the public as a whole to reach a new consensus about emerging changes in public attitudes. Particularly noticeable was the positive public response to the portrayal of two characters who challenged traditional gender norms: Mr Humphries (John Inman) and Margo Leadbetter (Penelope Keith), which for a short while gave both actor and character a life beyond each series.

Other notable developments were the public acceptance of a more open portrayal of sexual desire in women, the decline of innuendo and a more public discussion of deviant sexual behaviour, the open acceptance of pre-marital sexual relationships and the tentative recognition of extra-marital sexual relationships.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

From its creation in the 1920s until the mid-1950s, the BBC was Britain's only national broadcaster. Its director general, Lord Reith, considered it his duty to ensure programmes were primarily educational and informative and that they fitted his strict moral code. When the television service began to increase in popularity in the early 1950s, there was a feeling within the corporation that television, especially popular entertainment, was somehow 'vulgar' (Cotton, 2002). But when independent television started broadcasting in 1955, companies such as Lew Grade's ATV quickly captured millions of viewers with their slick, American-inspired, star-laden light entertainment and variety programmes. Consequently the BBC faced a new challenge; if it lost all its viewers to ITV, the public might question why it was still required to pay the licence fee. The corporation decided the answer was to make its own popular light entertainment, and by the 1970s it had succeeded in producing a string of highly successful shows.

This thesis examines four examples of one popular genre created within this context - the situation comedy. It places the genre within institutional, historical and production frameworks and studies how programme makers perceived contemporary audience response. It will investigate the balance between different aspects of the creation and reception of individual shows; their authorship, the production process, their place within the output of a public service broadcaster and the effect of public feedback. It will also explore how these different elements combined to create meaning. Did the serious-minded nature of the corporation affect the content of shows? How did the BBC manage creativity? How much freedom did writers have and how important were producers? And how did the BBC ensure it continued to engage with audiences during a time of great social change?

There have been several studies of the history, structure and working practices of the BBC. These include the corporation's official history, volume five of which deals with the BBC post-1955 (Briggs, 1991), and Burns' examination of the changing structures and industrial relations within the corporation in the 1960s and 1970s

(Burns, 1977). Read together, the books paint a detailed picture of the BBC at this time. Briggs takes a straightforwardly historical view, whereas Burns takes a sociological approach, focusing more on the way personnel interact with each other and the outside world. For example, Burns, who approaches his study much more as an outsider, is excellent on unravelling the complex codes of convention and professionalism at work in the BBC. Neither work pays detailed attention to programme content, however. Scannell and Cardiff (1991) have written on the social importance of the BBC, including an illuminating look at the importance of light entertainment, but their work deals with an earlier era. Studies of the BBC's standards and controls and theories of management, systems and ideology are of interest (Jay 1967; Morris, 1987; Madge, 1989), as is work surrounding how creativity is controlled and the limits of innovation within media organisations (Gallagher, 1982; Murdock, 1982; Negus, 1998; Frith, 2000; Ellis, 2004). Munro is particularly illuminating on the formal, and informal, pressures on the BBC at this time as regards censorship. Like Burns, he explores the notion that controls over content are not necessarily imposed from outside a media organisation, and that the culture within an organisation is crucial (Munro; 1979). Bakewell and Garnham's (1970) interviews with key BBC personnel, including light entertainment executives, are useful. Cardiff's insights into the class-based nature of the BBC's output are also relevant to my research (Cardiff, 1988). Tunstall (1993) sheds valuable light on the relationships between producers and writers, but he does not deal specifically with the BBC and writes about the later independent-producer era. The work of Gitlin (1994) and Cantor (1988) on the structures and output of prime-time US television, the role of the producer and the desire of programme makers to respond to the changing needs of audiences and advertisers again provide valuable insights, but their findings must be treated with caution because the modes of production in that country are very different to those used at the BBC. No one has provided a single, integrated study of an individual television genre within an historical and institutional framework

Comedy is an important genre worthy of serious study. 'Serious' drama may make political and social points but comedy is also a heavy bearer of meaning. In addition, it has to make people laugh. There is often resistance to the study of comedy because of a belief that to examine laughter is to destroy it. However, comedy often sheds light on societal beliefs and mores that more polemical genres cannot illuminate. Its

messages, which usually coincide with the “common sense” beliefs of the day, are often transmitted and received in an unquestioning, instinctual manner. Comedy is how we negotiate societal tensions pleasantly, and often subconsciously. In engaging with characters and situations that deviate from the norm, we are instinctively exploring the boundaries of normality, and agreeing how difference or deviance can be dealt with. Comedy is a huge area of study, touching upon many disciplines. Two of the most influential works are Freud on the ability of jokes to free our subconscious desires and aggression and Bakhtin’s study of the disruptive powers of the carnivalesque (Freud, 1976; Bakhtin, 1971). More recently, screen comedy has been the focus of academic attention (e.g. Neale and Krutnik, 1990; Horton, 1991). Palmer (1987) has taken a semiological approach, gay and feminist perspectives have been explored (Modleski, 1987; Gray, 1994; Healey, 1995; Wagg 1998), and specific examinations of comedy as it appears in different genres and contexts have appeared (e.g. Grote, 1983, and Marc, 1997, on sitcom; Jordan, 1983, on *Carry On* films and Hunt, 1998, on British low culture.) The BFI sitcom dossier (Cook (ed.), 1982b) also theorises comedy. In the dossier Jim Cook explores the use of narrative and performance in comedy, while Terry Lovell discusses the often tenuous relationship between different sitcom forms, audience expectation and ‘reality’. My research is primarily a production study, which examines changes in comedic values during a key period of societal change. However I shall investigate directly some of the questions posed by comic theory. These include whether comedy reinforces or subverts contemporary sexual attitudes, how it uses language and representation to transmit messages about deviance and normality, and the importance of the audience in the creation of meaning.

The 1970s may not seem such an inherently interesting decade to study as the 1960s because societal change was not so rapid and television, as a result, was not as startlingly innovative. But the decade was one in which the first wave of feminism began to have a real impact on social attitudes. This, together with the ongoing sexual revolution, the 1967 decriminalisation of homosexuality and the political and economic instability caused by the 1973 oil crisis created sexual and social tensions with which sitcoms directly, albeit gently, engaged. The 1970s was also the decade in which BBC light entertainment really hit its stride. BBC variety and comedy consistently topped ratings charts and some sitcoms made at this time have

subsequently entered the canon of 'classic' television (of the ten sitcoms to appear in BBC television's "Britain's Best Sitcom" Poll in 2004, six of them were made at the BBC in the 1970s). This study also examines changes in the genre in the early 1980s, when a radical Conservative government was in power.

Sitcom was an early purely televisual form, but it had its roots in music hall and radio and it is important to bear this in mind when studying its production. An approach that puts the production and reception of a genre within an historical context allows us to understand the relative power of writers, performers and producers, the shifts in this power through time and the subsequent impact upon content. If we are to understand the intentions of writers, producers and performers, it also helps to be aware of the comic tradition in which they were working.

Previous work on sitcom has tended to focus on just one aspect of the genre such as form, representation or ideology. Histories of sitcom are usually populist, while academic work on the genre is scattered, taking many different approaches. In Britain, serious consideration only began to be given to sitcom in the late 1970s, when Mick Eaton published a typology of the genre in *Screen* (Eaton, 1978). He highlighted the lack of research into sitcom as a televisual form, or indeed a lack of any serious academic research on sitcom. He argued that a more scientific approach was needed and worked towards a typology, identifying tendencies such as the constant repetition of characters, situations and the theme of entrapment, and the 'inside/outside' dichotomy, in which characters, situations and locations that are not part of the ongoing structure of the sitcom must be expelled so that everything can be 'back to normal' again by the next episode. This typology provided a useful guide to the generic form, but subsequent changes in the genre mean that observations originally presented as unchangeable truths must now be called into question. In the early 1980s, Cook gathered together several key articles in an edited BFI monograph (Cook (ed.), 1982b). But as each author took a different approach to the subject the monograph does not have a coherent overall view. I will consider individual contributions to this monograph below.

Some studies of television programmes and genres do take a multi-faceted approach, but none deal with comedy. In their work on *Dr Who*, Tulloch and Alvarado (1983)

combine examinations of production issues and the programme's ultimate function within the BBC's output with close analysis of characterisation, narrative and mise en scene. But *Dr Who* is a science fiction programme aimed at young people, and so plays a different role in the programme schedule and operates on the audience in a very different manner to sitcom. There have been some other interesting in-depth examinations of the production of programmes and their reception by audiences. These include *Hazell* (Alvarado and Buscombe, 1978), *Crossroads* (Hobson, 1982), *Euston Films* (Alvarado and Stewart, 1985) and *Eastenders* (Buckingham, 1987). Although these are illuminating, they deal with genres other than sitcom created, with the exception of *Eastenders*, for different television companies.

Previous work that looks at American sitcoms, (e.g. Feuer, 1984; Mayerle, 1991; Jones, 1992; Marc, 1997), must be treated with caution because these programmes are in many ways examples of a different form produced under different circumstances. This is a study of BBC sitcoms, so those made by other organisations are not a major focus.

A considerable degree of attention has been devoted to stereotype (Dyer, 1977; Neale, 1979) and representation in sitcoms and other genres. This includes work on the relationship between gender and class in US sitcom (Butsch, 1992), on the representation of women (Porter, 1998) and on racial representation (Daniels and Gerson, 1989; Pines, 1992). These insights are applied where relevant. Feminist approaches (Mueller, 1981; Gray, 1994; Rowe, 1997; Andrews 1998; Kirkham and Skeggs, 1998), have examined the representation of women, role-play in marriages, and power within sexual relationships. Other writers have looked at the portrayal of gay characters (Dyer, 1977; Healey, 1995). The BFI monograph discusses the use of ensemble casts and accepted comic types in David Croft sitcoms (Boyd-Bowman, 1982), and explores how the use of stereotypes and the triumph of "common sense" and traditional values make radical sitcoms unlikely (Medhurst and Tuck, 1982).

All these approaches have valuably explored questions about how a seemingly innocuous genre can carry coded messages about what is, and is not, acceptable and 'normal'. These writers' insights are useful to help gain a clearer picture of how stereotypes function, how behaviour and desire are portrayed and how each writer

explicitly, implicitly and subconsciously examined sexual politics. However, I intend to place issues of representation within a production context, in order to illuminate why certain social groups tend to be represented in a particular manner in comic texts. Furthermore, as well as women and gay men, I will explore the portrayal of all sexually mature characters, including middle-aged men and young adults.

The conscious or subconscious creation of meaning by the makers of television programmes is itself subject to a further factor – the meaning-producing role of the audience. Therefore, this study also examines each programme's reception by both contemporary critics and viewers. Little work has been done in Britain on the nature of the relationship between writers, producers and audiences. Hobson (1982) and Ang (1985) have studied how female audiences watch sitcom, gain satisfaction from feminine genres and empathise with female characters. Hobson has also written specifically on *Butterflies*, following interviews with contemporary, female audiences (Hobson, 1981). This work is of limited relevance because research on how the texts were read, the gratifications gained from them or their impact on society is not a central part of this study. More important for my research is the impact of this audience reaction on writers and executives and the nature of this interaction. For example, did multiple readings make it unlikely that any coherent feedback reached programme-makers? Other, more relevant, work has looked specifically at how audience response affected programme-makers but once again this focuses on American television (Cantor 1994; Collins, 1997).

The benefit of consulting such a wide range of secondary sources is that I have gained a good appreciation of the issues and questions surrounding popular public-service sector television, how and why it is made, the meanings that can be drawn from it and the messages it may contain. Different scholars have approached the subject in a range of ways and each has brought fresh insights. The danger of relying only on such sources however, is that with such a multitude of voices, no new and clear conclusions of my own can be reached. As a result I have also gone back to the original source material, including reports, minutes and memos, autobiographies, reviews, BBC audience research, letters to the *Radio Times* and newspaper articles. Key questions will be how the BBC's status as a public service broadcaster affected its relationship with its audience, how the corporation responded to public feedback,

and whether the content of these and future shows changed as a result. How people react to specific television programmes changes through time, so this study only concerns itself with contemporary opinion. Clearly, reviews, newspaper articles and letters only give a limited, and rather non-scientific, picture of actual contemporary opinion. They are, however, more likely to give an accurate representation than if modern viewers were asked to remember what they thought about a programme made thirty years ago. Access to certain documents in the BBC Written Archive Centre can be problematic, especially in regard to the later shows. What is available, however, is helpful and audience research reports and Programme Review Board minutes give a valuable insight into what BBC executives and the audience really thought about shows. I have also interviewed various key people. This is a very valuable source of information, as I have been able to ask very specific questions of the actual members of staff involved. It is important to bear in mind, though, that the memories of events that happened 30 years ago may be hazy or confused. The same is true of autobiographies and the BECTU Oral History Project tapes. If possible a range of different forms of research should be used to substantiate what is said.

There is always the danger, when placing programmes within their historical or production contexts, that texts become reduced to mere exemplars. As a result it is important to treat the texts as important meaning-bearing documents in their own right. Their creators were obviously highly influential, but the texts nevertheless exist as separate entities and can be read in ways in which their authors may not have intended. This is why, as well as looking at the conscious intentions of creators, I will examine how the texts function beyond them. In addition to contextualising these sitcoms, therefore, I shall carry out careful textual analysis to establish how they function and what they are saying.

To focus this work, I shall look specifically at just one aspect of the text; the portrayal of sexual behaviour and identity. Specifically, this includes sexual orientation (including the representation of gay men), sexual desire (how and with whom characters want sexual relations), sexual behaviour (who is actually having sex, or not), the language used by characters when referring to sexual matters, the representations of men and women and issues surrounding sexual relationships, such as marriage and fidelity. This was a time of shifting morality with regard to sexual

identity and behaviour and sitcom is an interesting example of how society attempted to negotiate with the subsequent tensions through the use of popular media. I will examine how different writing styles and comic traditions, different personal backgrounds and the status of women writers affected what is said about gender and familiar relationships, and establish how changing societal and sexual mores at this time affected the way sexuality is treated in comic fiction. I also ask if comedy was particularly suited to negotiating these sexual tensions.

I begin with an exploration of the context within which sitcoms were created at the BBC at this time. In what way did the ethos, management structure and working practices of the BBC Light Entertainment Department affect the style and content of sitcoms? Was radicalism encouraged, or did censorship narrow the range of material broadcast? How did the BBC solve the inherent contradiction of a high-minded public broadcaster producing popular comedy? I shall also explore the nature of the creative hierarchy and the relative power of different members of that hierarchy, such as writers, producers and television executives, to influence content. Finally, how did the BBC's corporate aim to function as a key player in an increasingly competitive and fragmented media market affect the type of programmes it made?

The four subsequent chapters each present a case study of one sitcom. The four shows chosen were all popular with audiences and critics, achieved high ratings and highlight different key questions about the writing, production and reception of sitcoms. Each presents audiences with a different comic situation and a range of different characters, indulging in a range of different sexual attitudes, behaviour and identities, with which viewers are invited to identify. This includes homosexuality, the behaviour and attitudes of the married suburban middle class, and the sexuality of young men. Because each consecutive show was screened slightly later in the relevant time period, they also effectively illustrate the nature of the development of the genre through time. In this way, by looking at how certain characters were portrayed and received, they enable us to see how the national consensus regarding sexuality was adapting.

Raymond Williams has identified how society can simultaneously contain portrayals of a culture at different stages of its development (Williams, 1980). Sitcom at the

BBC at this time illustrates this process. As part of an analysis within this context, it is important to establish the key cultural styles and influences present within these shows. What were the comedic traditions within which creative personnel were working, and how did this influence content? A case study of *Are You Being Served?* by David Croft illustrates the importance of the British music hall tradition in popular comedy. The department store in which the show is set is very much a residual environment – in many ways the world of Grace Brothers had already disappeared. A close examination of the text may reveal insights about the portrayal of sexual mores in this tradition, and the complicity of the audience in accepting these portrayals.

Middle England has always been a crucial part of the BBC's audience. A case study of *The Good Life* by John Esmonde and Bob Larbey will allow me to explore how the BBC portrayed this dominant culture, and how it dealt with issues surrounding suburban sexuality. How did a seemingly harmless show about self-sufficiency deal with middle-class sexual behaviour, identity and relationships? Was it possible for the BBC to incorporate difficult issues into a prime time family sitcom at a time of disorientating social change in a way that reassured audiences rather than frightened them?

Feminists in the 1970s were starting to successfully challenge traditional social structures and beliefs. But it was also a time when women were virtually invisible in the BBC Light Entertainment Department and were far more likely to be typing letters than writing sitcom scripts. A case study of *Butterflies* by Carla Lane may reveal how the BBC responded to this feminist challenge and reflected this emergent culture. Did *Butterflies* succeed in articulating women's frustrations and sensibilities, and if so, did it portray them in a more realistic, complex way?

Finally, how did the BBC respond to a growing awareness of young people as an emerging niche market? By the beginning of the 1980s, even BBC executives were starting to realise innovation was needed if the BBC was to compete against the upcoming Channel Four, which had a stated mission to innovate. A case study of *The Young Ones*, created by a new generation of writers, performers and producers, may reveal whether BBC sitcom succeeded in meeting this challenge. In addition, the

research may reveal what, beyond the show's innovative formal structure, *The Young Ones* was actually saying to, and about, these newly-targeted young audiences.

CHAPTER TWO

The BBC comedy department and sitcom output 1973-1984

During the 1970s and early 1980s the BBC was responsible for a string of hit sitcoms, many of which have been cited by critics as some of the best ever produced. In 1999 the *Daily Mirror* compiled a list of 'top five' and 'flop five' sitcoms in which all the top five, but none of the failures, were made in the 1970s (Hughes, 1999). Throughout the decade, the audience share for sitcom was 20 per cent or above, compared to seven per cent at the start of the 1990s. This success stands in stark contrast to the situation in the mid 1950s when the BBC faced competition for the first time. As well as losing its monopoly, the BBC lost millions of viewers to commercial television companies that gave viewers what they appeared to want – plenty of slick, glossy light entertainment. The BBC fought back and by the 1970s its Light Entertainment Department was producing hit after hit in all forms of comedy and variety, including sitcom. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1970s a new generation of writers and producers pointed to the bland, comfortable nature of '70s sitcoms as one of the reasons they felt alternative comedy was a necessity.

What happened at the BBC's light entertainment department at this time to enable it to change course so radically, and how did the BBC reconcile its public service ethos and the high-minded principles of its first director general, Lord Reith, with its drive to win back lost viewers by producing successful light entertainment of its own? To answer these questions we must look in detail at how the light entertainment department operated at this time, its hierarchy and its relationship with the rest of the BBC. What was the role of the producer and the status of the writer and how did these creative staff work together? Were they subject to censorship and control or were they free to create what they wanted? How important was the response of the audience and the press in determining the content of sitcoms? Was the department's sitcom output safe and bland? And, if so, why?

The Legacy of the 1950s and 1960s

BBC television, the world's first television service, started in 1936. But only a small number of people had receivers, and broadcasting was limited to a few hours a day. The service closed down during the Second World War, and British radio reached its zenith in terms of popularity and influence. When television began transmitting again in 1946 it was seen very much as radio's poor relation and executives were wary of throwing too much money at it. In addition, the influence of the BBC's first director general, Lord Reith, still loomed large over the corporation. Reith, who was Director General from 1927 to 1938, was a Scottish Calvinist and his moralistic worldview and belief the BBC should be a national institution largely free from Government control were to be crucial in establishing its identity. He saw broadcasting as a moral force and thought programmes should be educational and morally uplifting as well as entertaining to watch. The threat of the end of the BBC's television monopoly in the 1950s provoked a thundering speech from Lord Reith in the House of Lords in which he compared independent television to smallpox, bubonic plague and the Black Death (for details of the end of the BBC's monopoly, see Briggs, 1991). The BBC, he implied, was a force for Christian good and asked, "need we be ashamed of moral values, or of intellectual and ethical objectives? It is these that are here and now at stake" (quoted online at Transdiffusion network). Not all output was serious-minded, however. The BBC had produced much successful radio comedy, and many of its comedians, such as Ted Ray, Tommy Handley, Arthur Askey and Tommy Trinder, were household names (see Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, for details of pre-war light entertainment). There were also popular television programmes, such as *Picture Page* (1946-54), *What's My Line?* (1951-62) and *Come Dancing* (1950-95), but light entertainment on television was not a priority.

Three key developments in the 1950s, however, helped change this. Canadian Ronnie Waldman took over as head of the Light Entertainment Department and "took it very seriously" (Cotton, 2001). He believed British television was "small, dull, slow, poor, starved and amateurish" (Independent Teleweb, online), and set about revitalising the department. He imposed strict discipline and obtained ideas for new genres such as sitcom from America. He also recruited comedy producers and writers from radio, the theatre, other BBC departments and from universities. This disparate group was new

and fresh and Waldman encouraged a certain amount of free thinking. Cotton, however, stresses that “we were very much a part of the BBC. We accepted that and didn’t want to change the BBC particularly” (Cotton, 2001).

In 1955, despite Lord Reith’s protests, the BBC faced competition for the first time. After a long public debate, the government decided to allow a handful of independent television companies to provide an alternative television service. Companies would be regionally based and provide local programming, but popular shows would be networked. The companies would make money by selling advertising slots. Once the Independent Television network started it quickly became apparent that its greater emphasis on light entertainment was winning it millions of viewers. One of the most successful companies, ATV, was run by Lew Grade who had a background in show business and was good at spotting talent and providing popular entertainment. The BBC, which considered *The Brains Trust* (1955-61) and *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* (1952-59) light-hearted fare, found viewers were deserting them in droves for ITV’s exciting, American-style shows such as ATV’s *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* (1955-67, 1973-74). By 1957 the BBC’s share had dropped to 28 per cent, which meant the attitude at the BBC shifted from ‘disdain’ to ‘panic’ (Milne, 1988, p.24). The BBC realised if it lost all its viewers the publicly-funded television service would lose its reason for existing, and light entertainment began to be seen as a way of grabbing mass audiences and hopefully keeping them tuned in for more intellectual fare. Subsequently the department started to get much more money.

In addition, in 1960 Hugh Carleton Greene became the new director general of the BBC and the corporation’s rigid Reithian approach began to relax. Greene was known for his liberal views and strong belief in freedom of speech. He frequently defended controversial comedy, notably *That Was The Week That Was* (1962-63), against critics concerned about the edgy nature of many new shows. The newly revitalised Light Entertainment Department thus had the freedom make sitcoms acknowledged to be of a very high quality, which captured high audience ratings yet garnered critical appreciation and had the challenging aspect of art. The most notable were *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965-75), written by Johnny Speight, and *Steptoe and Son* (1962-74) by Galton and Simpson, who had previously written for Tony Hancock.

Even so, freedom was not the same as “total licence” (Morris, 1987, p.5) and, at the end of the 1960s, there was a certain amount of dissatisfaction within the department. Many of its members felt light entertainment was treated as an unfortunate necessity by top managers, who all tended to be recruited from journalism, and there was a general feeling the jobs of light entertainment staff were much more dependent on ratings than those in other departments. If a show did not win high audience figures it, and by association the people who made it, were seen as failures (Burns, 1977, p.146). Many perceived elitism at the top of the BBC that showed itself in “a greater willingness to take the risks involved in, say, political controversy than those in popular entertainment” (Munro, 1979, p.32). Frank Muir, who was head of comedy in the 1960s, believed the department’s job was to “top up the viewing figures so that the BBC could not only have its required quota of viewers, but could also mount quality programmes of minority appeal.” For this reason it was necessary to see some comedy as a “baked beans” meal rather than a gourmet artistic feast (Muir, 1988, p.264-265).

Into the 1970s

Despite the ongoing perception by light entertainment staff that other BBC people considered comedy to be something of a throwaway genre, key critical and popular successes continued to be made and the department entered the 1970s in good shape. By 1970 many of the key personnel who were to steer the department through the decade were in place. Greene had gone, but his successor, Sir Charles Curran, was explicit in his belief that “it is not the BBC’s job to adopt a particular morality and try to persuade everybody else to follow it” (Morris, 1987, p.3). In 1973 BBC1 controller Paul Fox was replaced by Brian Cowgill, who remained in the job until Bill Cotton took over in 1977. Cotton, who was the son of bandleader Billy and had a great love of variety, had been head of light entertainment since 1970. That post was subsequently taken by experienced producer and *Comedy Playhouse* creator James Gilbert, who said he believed in experimenting and allowing for a certain number of failures (Gilbert, 1976). The head of light entertainment was responsible for the entire output of comedy and variety on BBC1 and BBC2. Below him the head of comedy was in charge of sitcoms and sketch shows. This job was held by four men during the 1970s. The first was Michael Mills, described as a mad professor type with a talent for

irritating the hierarchy (Took, 1984). He was followed in 1972 by *Hancock* and *Steptoe* producer Duncan Wood, who, after just a year, followed Paul Fox to YTV. The job then went to James Gilbert and, in 1977, John Howard Davies, whose production credits include *The Good Life*, *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 79) and *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* (1976-79).

The Chain of Command

Ideas for sitcoms could, and did, originate at a number of places in the hierarchy. New writers were initially encouraged to approach the Head of Comedy. Carla Lane's career began when she and writing partner Myra Taylor sent an unsolicited script to Michael Mills. He rejected it but told the pair to try and write a sitcom about flat sharing, which became *The Liver Birds* (1969-79, 1996). However, producers could be involved at this stage too. *Till Death Us Do Part* producer Dennis Main Wilson was known to be particularly good at spotting new talent. Much of the new material, however, was commissioned from writers already known to the department.

Ideas for shows were discussed informally by executives and producers within the department throughout the year, but the actual decision about what was to be made for the coming season was taken by the channel controller who was the "pivotal point of BBC judgement on programme taste and editorial duty" (Curran, 1979, p.185). He made decisions following the so-called Offers Meetings every autumn. Some parts of the schedule, such as news, were considered to be immovable and, after a series of meetings with individual department heads, the channel controller decided what other shows should be commissioned. The head of light entertainment would submit ideas for programmes, including details about content, style, performers, writers and costs. The controller would discuss the viability of these shows with the Planning Department, negotiations were held and the department head would be told what programmes were required. If a producer was not already involved in the project, one would be assigned. He would then be in control, but if he feared the material could be controversial and was unsure whether to allow it, he would be expected to refer the decision upwards to the department head, who could himself refer the decision up to his superior. However, each department would still be allocated an agreed number of

'slots' in the schedule, so if programme ideas were turned down at Offers Meetings, these slots would still have to be filled. This sometimes led to a situation where new programmes had to be commissioned and made in a hurry.

The degree of creative independence available to those at the lower end of the hierarchy was considerable, despite the BBC's fairly rigid structures. Bill Cotton tended to concentrate his efforts on the BBC's variety output. The executives above him often came from journalism and current affairs backgrounds so to a large extent "the chiefs have to depend on the advice and expertise of the Indians" when it came to comedy (Took, 1984). The split in the Light Entertainment Department between variety and comedy became more pronounced at this time because of the growing importance of pop music, and as a result power devolved downwards into the Comedy Department. In this atmosphere, an experienced producer had a great deal of autonomy and could exert considerable influence to get a programme made, especially if a slot needed to be filled quickly. Writer John Sullivan recalls how, when he was a scene shifter, he showed Dennis Main Wilson the script of *Citizen Smith* (1977-80) in the BBC bar. Eight weeks later the show was on the air" (Steeple, 1985). David Croft, whose 1970s output included *Dad's Army* (1968-77) and *Are You Being Served?* (1972-85), also wrote scripts and produced them himself with a minimum of interference from executives. The BBC made so many sitcoms, he believed, executives simply didn't have the time to interfere (*Television Today*, 1981). Munro noted that "...power over what appears on the screen becomes greatest as we descend lower down through the hierarchy from governors and higher management to programme makers, for this is the level at which programme ideas are generally originated and always executed" (Munro, 1979, p.20). If they did not trust their producers, executives would have had to have spent so much time on the details of individual shows that their job would have become unworkable. Often, they did not even see individual shows, relying on press coverage to get an idea of what a show was like (Tunstall, 1993, p.14). Weekly Programme Review Board meetings would also help executives keep up to speed, with the week's shows discussed in detail by key members of staff. This was seen as a 'positive' way of maintaining high standards, however, rather than a means of rebuke or control (Burns, 1977, p.258).

The Producers

Producers were a key part of the creative process. According to Burns there was “universal deference” to them at the BBC. They were considered to be at the ‘coal face’ and their creativity the BBC’s *raison d’être*. Many executives were frightened that if they interfered they could be destroying that creativity (Burns, 1977, p.219). Jay describes the relationship between producers and writers in terms of a sexual relationship. The producer (man) implanting the seeds of an idea, which the writer (woman) gestates. The female role is more obviously necessary, but the male role is just as important (Jay, 1967, p.94). Charles Curran believed programmes were shaped by producers and that they were responsible for judgements of taste: “It is only in the exceptional situation of crisis that judgements will be made at a higher level” (Curran, 1979, p104). He believed what mattered was “the creativity of the programme-makers: Everything else should be designed to help them” (Curran, 1975).

Nevertheless, most light entertainment producers at this time believed the key part of their job was to provide high-quality entertainment rather than to push boundaries or create great art. The key to a successful script, they believed, was not what it was about, but that it was funny. As a show progressed, producers discovered from audience research whether the public was amused, but initially they decided whether it was funny by seeing if they themselves laughed. Their taste was an important criterion for what was, and was not, made. Certainly the dissemination of an ideological message was not the primary aim of producers or writers; “Television isn’t meant to change the world; it’s meant to entertain people” David Croft declared (Bakewell, 1975) Even so, the BBC would accept an established writer, such as Johnny Speight, dealing with a controversial issue if the end result was funny. Michael Mills maintained “We never say to a writer: ‘do us a controversial sitcom.’ If he set out to write something controversial to order then that would result in something dull. A first-class writer will write what he wants to write” (Hutchinson, 1971). And producer Gareth Gwenlan said “I’m not conscious of an influx of scripts which are using comedy to make a social or political point. If such scripts come in and they’re funny then they get done” (*Television Today*, 1985).

During the 1970s, the BBC's Light Entertainment Department made all its shows in-house and therefore a relatively small and stable band of producers was responsible for much of the sitcom output. Personnel were not encouraged to move between departments, so light entertainment producers tended to work in this genre throughout their careers. They included Duncan Wood, John Howard Davies, James Gilbert, David Croft and Gareth Gwenlan, who was responsible for *To the Manor Born* (1979-81) and *Butterflies* (1978-83). One of the most prolific producers was Sydney Lotterby, who produced *The Liver Birds*, *Porridge* (1973-77), *Last of the Summer Wine* (1973-), *Open All Hours* (1973-85), *Butterflies*, *Going Straight* (1978) and *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* (1973-78), and one of the most influential was Dennis Main Wilson, who was known as a larger than life character with an enthusiastic, intuitive approach to work, a loud personality and a fondness for drink. He was also good at spotting writing talent and claimed never to tolerate interference from above. In his view, executives should not "interfere with the output of a brilliant, creative author. You leave your personal thoughts at home" (Main Wilson, 1991)

The writers were the original authors of a script, but theirs was not the only input into its content. Script editors did not rewrite completed scripts. They were there to help writers develop their ideas for television. However producers often worked closely with writers, sometimes suggesting general ideas about themes or plots. The producer would decide whether a pilot script was satisfactory or whether he felt changes were needed. Lotterby recalled; "Obviously he'd have his ideas of how it was going to work and I might agree or perhaps try and guide him in another direction" (*Television Today*, 1980b). Changes may have been necessary because the script was too long or because the content or standard was not acceptable, but producers were careful with writers' egos. As Harold Snoad, another sitcom producer, recalled:

"Obviously constructive criticism is generally better received than a straight 'it's not funny' but, if that is your overall feeling, say so – albeit tactfully. Of course, everybody's sense of humour differs, so it is important to try and put yourself on the same wavelength as the writer and, ideally, the audience for whom the show is intended" (Snoad, 1988, p.5).

The producer may also have encouraged the writer to avoid expensive crowd scenes, location shots and so on. Some writers would attend read-throughs and rehearsals and make any changes they or the producer felt necessary as they heard their dialogue spoken aloud by actors. Actors themselves had a certain amount of power to ask for changes as well. Carla Lane says she made changes to *Butterflies* during the rehearsal period because one of the actors was upset as another was getting all the laughs (Lane, 1996, pp. 86-88). Paul Eddington maintains the amount of swearing in *The Good Life* was cut back at the request of the actors (Eddington, 1995, p.128). After rehearsals, further cutting for length may have been required. If the dialogue needed changing at this point Snoad recommended discussing it with the writer: "Most writers are very reasonable and are only too happy to accept something which is an obvious improvement to their original" (Snoad, 1988, p.39).

The show would be shot, usually in front of a live studio audience, and then edited. The producer would probably have a fairly clear idea during shooting how he would want it edited and would work closely with the film editor. The BBC did not use 'canned laughter'; the laughs heard on the soundtrack were genuine responses to the material from a live audience (Deighton, 1972). However, if retakes were needed and the subsequent laughs were not as loud as the first, often the original laugh would be dubbed on during postproduction. Various attempts by writers in the past to convince the BBC to film comedies without an audience have failed. Because the success of a show is measured by how funny it is, the laughter was seen as important and executives feared a laugh-free sitcom would baffle viewers. As late as 1997 head of comedy Geoffrey Perkins was arguing there had never been a British sitcom that had worked without an audience (Edwards, 1997) (By the end of the decade, however, the laugh-free *The Royle Family* (1998-2000) was a hit). Furthermore, writers, directors and producers liked the immediate "tangible reaction" an audience provides (Bakewell and Garnham, 1970, p.52) while actors found an audience helped their performance (Lotterby, 1993).

The formation of unofficial 'teams' also contributed to the establishment of a successful formula that tended to be repeated. In the 1970s it was common for writers, producers, and even stars, to work with each other repeatedly. For example, Sydney Lotterby, Esmonde and Larbey and Ronnie Barker worked together on *Porridge* and

Going Straight and Lotterby and Barker also worked together on *Seven of One* (1973) and *Open All Hours*. According to Lotterby this was something the BBC encouraged: “A rapport grows between you and the author and you and the principal actor... and obviously the BBC is quick to see this” (*Television Today*, 1980b). Writer Eric Chappell claimed a carefully crafted show could be ruined if the producer and the writer did not work closely together and share a common understanding of what each was trying to achieve (Felstein, 1987). The importance of the star in this creative team is often overlooked, but he or she could be crucial in setting the tone of a show, developing the character and helping to attract audiences. Main Wilson believed a skilful actor played an integral role in a production; not only interpreting material but also manipulating audiences: “They're not just there to play a script. Once they are on, they are directing themselves, and the audience” (Main Wilson, 1991). As Frith points out, however, star quality is mysterious and has to be ‘revealed’ by the public rather than determined by the programme makers (Frith, 2000, p.206).

The Writers

Although the role of the producer was important, the writer was perceived as being at the centre of the creative process. Duncan Wood believed the scriptwriter to be of such primary importance he would not allow scripts to be altered by anyone but himself. He made himself unpopular with actors by refusing to let them change so much as one word (Took, 1997).

Bill Cotton believes the high regard in which the BBC held sitcom writers stretched back to the early days of commercial television, when ITV began having a great deal of success with variety. Ronnie Waldman, the boss of the BBC Light Entertainment Department, decided to “strike back with a string of top-class situation comedies, and he set about attracting the best of the new writers into his group” (Cotton, 1989). In 1966, head of comedy Frank Muir said that “the genesis of our comedy shows takes place in the mind of the writer”, adding that there was only a small pool of full-time television comedy writers (Muir, 1966, p.12). This situation continued into the 1970s. Most of the BBC’s hit sitcoms were written by a just a few people, including Johnny Speight (*Till Death Us Do Part*), Esmonde and Larbey (*The Good Life*), Dick

Clement and Ian La Frenais (*Porridge*, *Going Straight*), Carla Lane (*The Liver Birds*, *Butterflies*), Roy Clarke (*Last of the Summer Wine*), David Croft (*Are You Being Served*, *It Ain't Half Hot*, *Mum* (1974-81), *Dad's Army*) Richard Waring (*My Wife Next Door* (1972)) and John Sullivan (*Citizen Smith*). As we shall see, they were consciously and unconsciously influenced by various factors and were subject to controls, but what they wrote was largely up to them and they had a great deal of power to determine tone and content. Bill Cotton believes even if executives thought they knew what to expect from a script, they were often surprised, but would go on and make it anyway: "You've got to clear your mind" (Cotton, 2001). Sidney Lotterby, meanwhile, believes actors and directors are merely "...interpreters. The person in fact who's got all the business is the writer" (*Comedy Connections*, BBC, 2003, "Porridge").

The BBC's approach was different to that taken by American television executives. There a formula for an individual sitcom would be created and a team of highly-paid writers would work between them on scripts. Even by the mid-1980s, BBC executives still favoured individual authors rather than teams. When writers Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran suggested creating a show along the American lines "the TV executives just looked shocked and said 'you are the show. It won't work without you'" (Thomas, 1987). Huw Wheldon, when Managing Director of Television, dismissed team writing as "copy writing" creating "exact, sophisticated and brilliant work which makes an immediate impact for a precise purpose" but not "the inwardness of an individual creation" (Wheldon, 1974, p.11). This authorial, literary approach meant writers could write only as many shows as they felt they had in them – they were not required to churn out dozens of episodes a year. This also suited producers, who had no desire to work on the same show for month after month (Tunstall, 1993, p.8). There was also less emphasis placed on 'gags' than in ITV or US sitcoms – an entire scene without a single joke was not unheard of. This was helped by the fact that BBC shows, at almost a full half hour, had more time to set up situations and characters. Shows on commercial stations were usually 24-and-a-half minutes long and were split in two halves by an advertising break. This meant that writers attempted to structure the show so that there would be a funny line before the commercials. Carla Lane has described the nightmare of rewriting *Butterflies* for American TV, with an insistence on funny lines and constant interference from executives and script editors. She

believes American writers are just a cog in the machine, with most of the writing done after the submission of the original script. As a defeated Lane left Los Angeles, even her driver promised to look at her script to “see what I can do with it” (see Lane, 1996, pp.104-9 for details of her Hollywood experiences).

Controls

Writers were not unconditionally venerated by BBC executives, who were quick to stress they had ultimate control. Michael Mills had *The Liver Birds* rewritten behind Carla Lane’s back (Mills, 1971); and Duncan Wood, responding to a letter in the *Radio Times*, warned: “...the BBC is required to exercise editorial control over all its programmes. No writers or artists can reasonably expect to have carte blanche to say and do just what they like on screen” (Wood, 1973). John Howard Davies too, although believing the writer to be all-important, “never fails to ram home company policy, that they must never underestimate public taste, and strive at all times to raise the quality of their product” (Vauncez, 1991). To a certain extent the level of this control depended on the content and tone of a programme, its place in the schedule and the type of audience it would be likely to attract. Bad language or explicit sexual content in a prime time sitcom was clearly less likely to be tolerated than in a post-watershed show. The individual beliefs and tastes of producers and executives were also important. What they felt was acceptable was just as much a factor as official guidelines and they were aware what was funny coming from one performer may sound crude coming from another (Munro, 1979, p.163).

Theoretically, the government had ultimate power over what was broadcast on the BBC, as it appointed the Board of Governors and renewed the charter. The Beverage Inquiry had clearly stated that the government’s power was absolute.

“The governors who constitute the corporation can be removed at any time. The licence can be revoked by the Post Master General at any time if, in his opinion, it is failing in its duties. The Post Master General can veto any proposed broadcast or class of broadcast, and in doing so can require the corporation to broadcast any or other matter desired by it.” (Beverage, 1949, par. 28).

However, despite various tensions between the BBC and the government throughout the corporation's history, usually because of the political content of documentaries, as a rule ministers left the BBC free to decide its own limits of what constitutes good taste and acceptable boundaries in light entertainment shows. Beverage accepted that "in practice it has become the agreed policy of successful governments, accepted by parliaments, that the corporation should be independent of the government of the day." (Beverage, 1949, par. 28).

The BBC charter stated that the BBC was required to "disseminate information, education and entertainment", but was not more specific about the content of programmes. In a 1964 letter to the Postmaster General, BBC chairman Lord Normanbrook said that the Board of Governors was well aware of its duty to ensure that programmes "maintain a high general standard in all respects" and that, as far as possible, they should "not offend against good taste or decency". (Normanbrook, 1964). However, these assurances are entirely voluntary, and not laid down in law or enshrined in the charter. Obviously the BBC is subject to the law of the land along with everyone else, and there are certain acts under which it could be prosecuted. These include the Official Secrets Act, Incitement to Racial Hatred, Defamation laws and Contempt of Court. These are more relevant to documentaries, however, rather than light entertainment. The Obscene Publications Act of 1959 makes it illegal to publish material that would tend to deprave or corrupt, but broadcasting is exempt. A prosecution could still be brought under common law, but the defence that the material is in the public good is available, and anyway it is notoriously difficult to prove that something has depraved or corrupted.

Lord Annan believed that it is the producer who exercises the freedom, or lack of it, that exists in the broadcasting organisation within which he works. He described the relationship between BBC programme-makers and executives as one of "merry co-operation" and self censorship rather than "*avant garde* rebel and sticky authority" (Annan, 1970 p.264, par. 16.48). Certainly, controls were not applied rigidly or overtly at the BBC at this time. Executives expected producers to be sensible about setting suitable boundaries, and producers expected writers to exercise self-control. The system usually worked. Referring to *Butterflies*, Sydney Lotterby accepted that

“we have to remember that you can do things in drama that would not be acceptable in comedy” (*Television Today*, 1980b). David Croft admitted “a lot of self-censorship went on” and maintained that he insisted upon a post-watershed slot for *Up Pompeii* (1969-70) (Morgan, 1997). Duncan Wood, who worked with Galton and Simpson on *Steptoe and Son*, said he valued realism and was prepared to tolerate risqué content if it made the show more ‘real’. Even so, stricter rules applied to pre-watershed shows and ‘average’ comedies (Ashforth, 1976). Bill Cotton was less likely to accept bad language if he felt it was gratuitous and more likely to tolerate it in a prestigious artistic creation such as *Till Death Us Do Part* (Cotton, 2001). However, comments from producers and executives on the letters page of the *Radio Times* in the 1970s tended to defend writers’ freedoms and writers were also permitted to defend themselves. Moreover, backed up by audience research, Alasdair Milne believes it was bad language that most offended audiences. As programme controller, he did not perceive risqué sexual content as being as great a threat to viewers (Milne, 1988, pp.67-67).

Policy codes did exist on matters such as sex, violence, drugs and the content of children’s programmes, but the general feeling in the BBC in the 1970s was that they were just guidelines which could be ignored. The notorious ‘little green book’ laying down what was acceptable in entertainment (no jokes about commercial travellers, rabbit, ladies’ underwear, etc) was officially abandoned in 1963, and standards became far more relaxed in the 1960s and 1970s. Producers made final judgements on what was suitable for audiences to see. It was assumed that there was a general consensus about these things, and that the BBC’s aim was to mirror this. Executives, who, according to Burns, were often frightened of “stopping the flow of creative genius”, would avoid getting too heavy with rules and regulations, and consequently controls and boundaries were vague and constantly shifting: Burns notes;

“Judgements are not based on written laws... In part they are based on precedent and tradition; but precedents can be ignored and traditions questioned and modified... What they are based on can best be described as... a general view of what is fitting and seemly” (Burns, 1977, p.151).

The BBC handbook of 1974 suggests that this was indeed the case. Referring to its *Tastes and Standards in BBC Programmes* pamphlet, it assured viewers that this was not “a new code of practice and detailed guide for producers”, but rather was “intended as a statement of general principles which had been evolved over a long period.” It goes on to stress that “in the BBC’s view ‘codes’ can never completely replace the exercise of individual judgement in particular cases and the system of ‘reference up’ on which it has always relied.” (BBC, 1973, p. 15.)

Munro describes an organisation which, despite its size and hierarchical structure, was full of strong-minded individualistic professionals who were able to avoid editorial control or censorship either by side-stepping it, or by persuading the powers-that-be to let them have their way (Munro, 1979, p.21). For example, comedy producer Beryl Vertue made sure she never knew what the rules were: “If you know rules and obstacles you spend a lot of time dealing with them” (Treneman, 1997). Producers were supposed to follow the system of ‘upward referral’. This meant if a producer was worried whether the content of a show was controversial and could be unsuitable for normal broadcast, he would ‘refer up’ to his boss. He, in turn could also refer up if he were unsure, until a decision was made. This system was in place to try and prevent overly controversial shows getting on the air. Even so, many producers, especially mavericks such as Dennis Main Wilson, resisted any form of censorship. Although he was very loyal to the corporation, “which he believed was the greatest institution that had ever happened” (Speight, 1997), Main Wilson said he believed in always putting his programme before the demands of executives because good programmes could only enhance the BBC (Main Wilson, 1991). Burns believes the central ethos of ‘professionalism’ at the BBC encouraged this. ‘Professionals’ such as comedy producers saw their skills and professional standards as independent of anyone, even the BBC. So they felt themselves honour-bound to escape constraints in order to preserve their ‘artistic freedom’. Executives colluded in this process, creating “a situation where, however messy it may appear, the different professional prides and the different personal prides have the maximum possible amount of liberty to run free” (Burns, 1977, p.127). Annan agreed that “self-discipline” based on a sound knowledge of the audience was far superior to censorship (Annan 1970, p265, par.16.50). Gallagher notes that the accepted and commonly held “professional truths”

at the BBC were far more effective than overt controls and that “the policy of ‘referral upward’ appeared to work in favour of the communicators through the invocation of ‘professionalism’ as a joint response – of both executives and producer – to outside attack” (Gallagher, 1982, p.168). In practice this meant that often, rather than a huge row before transmission, disagreements between producers and executives were settled retrospectively, with a ‘don’t do that again’ memo (Tunstall, 1993, p.5). One controller said he would try and block some ideas, but would probably ultimately give in. “I shall just let you have your head and then we’ll see what comes of it and we’ll criticise it afterwards” (Burns, 1977, p. 244).

Galton and Simpson’s sitcom *Casanova ’73* (1973), is an example of how the upward referral system worked in practice. It also shows how audience reaction could have a swift and decisive effect on executives’ thinking. The seven-part show was written as a vehicle for Leslie Phillips and was about a sexually rapacious married man who commits adultery every week. It was given a key 8pm slot but received an extremely bad reaction from critics and audiences. Questions were asked in the House of Commons about it, moral crusader Mary Whitehouse took offence and top critic Nancy Banks Smith walked out of the preview. Head of light entertainment Bill Cotton complained to the head of programmes that it was tasteless and it swapped places in the schedule with *Mastermind* (1972-97, 2003-), which was shown after the watershed (Milne, 1988, p.64). Cotton, nevertheless, defended in the *Radio Times* the right of writers to deal with sexual issues following letters from readers who described *Casanova ’73* as “smuttiness surpassing in bad taste anything I have previously seen on the BBC”, “a new low in comedy” and “lechery with Leslie”. He argued that “sex in one form or another has always been a subject for humour” (Cotton, 1973). Today its writers defend it, arguing “there was not a nipple to be seen anywhere” (BFI online).

Other Influences on Content

The professional ethos of the BBC, the liberal views of its top executives, the high regard in which producers and writers were held and the ease with which hierarchies and controls could be bypassed or ignored all helped to create a situation in which

creative freedom could flourish. But 1970s sitcoms tended to veer away from controversy to a degree out of proportion to the actual degree of censorship or hierarchical controls applied by producers or executives. This suggests that other, more subtle, factors affected content and the treatment of risqué subject matter. In this section I want to explore what these may have been.

Taking a year at random, the BBC's sitcom output in 1974 consisted of the David Croft wartime concert party comedy *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum*; *Second Time Around* about a divorced man having an affair with a younger woman; *No Strings* about a bachelor taking on a female flatmate; *The Prince of Denmark*, in which Ronnie Corbett runs a pub; the June Whitfield and Terry Scott vehicle *Happy Ever After*; *Porridge*; and *Last of the Summer Wine*. The type of shows on offer drove young producer Paul Jackson to distraction.

“One problem with sitcom is that it encapsulates what's wrong with TV in general. The audience is popularly perceived as white, middle-class, middle-aged, and middle-income, and programmes are made which they will understand. So you get this never-ending plethora of suburban sitcoms. I wonder how much interest there really is in the continuing agonies of Richard Waring's marriage. We've seen every bleeding phase of it.” (Shearman, 1985).

As has already been noted, most light entertainment producers and writers saw their function as providing entertainment. But the success of controversial shows such as *Till Death* in the 1960s suggested the public could also be broadminded, and by the 1970s Burns notes a relaxing of the self-censorship writers and producers had imposed regarding theme (Burns, 1977, p.135). So the decade saw sitcoms dealing with marital break-up (*Second Time Around*, *My Wife Next Door*), prison (*Porridge*), mental instability (*The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*, *Fawlty Towers*), adultery (*Butterflies*), criminals (*Mr Big*) and living in sin (*Rings on their Fingers*).

However, this broader range of subject matter did not necessarily mean that the content of shows became more radical. Although the BBC was publicly prepared to stand by its more controversial shows, behind the scenes managers were more

pragmatic. Dennis Main Wilson, who had been responsible for *Till Death Us Do Part*, the most controversial sitcom of all, believed writers should be given the freedom to express themselves, and abhorred any interference from above. But the BBC had been known to lose its nerve even where he was concerned – it tried to pull a *Till Death* sketch from the 1972 Royal Variety Show (Lotterby, 1993). The corporation, dependent on a royal charter and licence fee money and constantly under scrutiny from an often hostile right-wing press, could not afford to alienate politicians or the public to any great degree. *Casanova '73* is an example of the instant public outrage the BBC could expect if the sexual morality of a show was considered to be beyond the pale. Furthermore, less challenging sitcoms were more likely to attract family audiences. The BBC was aware of its need to justify the licence fee by appealing to large numbers of people while still meeting needs not met by commercial television. It was keen to appeal to so-called ‘opinion leaders’ (such as politicians, journalists and teachers), as well as ‘opinion followers’. A show able to appeal to such a wide variety of people was likely to be well made and have interesting, three-dimensional characters but was unlikely to advocate anything other than ‘normality’ when it came to sexual identity or behaviour. In fact, BBC output remained resolutely middlebrow. Television executive Michael Grade believes all the top light entertainment shows including *Hancock*, *The Good Life*, *Porridge* and *Fawlty Towers* that “have been acclaimed by the serious critics and enjoyed by the leaders have also been shows that appealed to the critics of the popular papers and the followers” (Grade, 1979). Cardiff describes how the BBC attracted a mass middlebrow audience (the audience which it believed would benefit most from its mission to educate, entertain and inform) by creating something rather subtler than the usual middle-class, middlebrow entertainment. These shows adapted middlebrow forms to make them accessible to a less educated public (Cardiff, 1988). Programme Controller in the 1960s, Huw Wheldon, specifically stated that the BBC, aware that families during this period tended to watch as a group, was aiming for this “middle ground”, avoiding both the controversial nature of many theatre productions and the bland ‘pap’ of American-style TV (Wheldon, 1967, pp.7-8). In its evidence to the Annan Committee, the BBC stated the aim was not to act as some sort of moral force, “sending messages to society” from on high. Instead there was “a kind of bargain struck between the professional makers of programmes and the public” (Annan, 1970, pp. 80-81, par 8.6). This attitude, the report noted, was especially true after the launch of ITV and

the rise of 'professionalism' at the BBC noted by Burns. Programme makers began to see this professional code as more important than any moral one.

The type of person working for the Light Entertainment Department at this time and the BBC's London bias were also undoubtedly important. Most of the writers and producers of 1970s sitcoms were middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual white men and the characters and situations they created tended to reflect that. Even the BBC itself realised this. In 1979 James Gilbert complained television was in danger of becoming middle-aged, predictable and taken for granted (Grade, 1979). The following year producer John Lloyd said that sitcom was failing to reflect the truth: "Britain is a messy, confused place at the moment and that is not generally reflected in what we see in much of television situation comedy" (*Television Today*, 1980a). Furthermore, unlike the ITV network, which broadcast productions by companies from all over Britain, the BBC was largely London-based. Even the groundbreaking northern sitcom *The Likely Lads* was filmed in Willesden Junction. There were exceptions, such as working class writers Speight and Sullivan, and David Croft, whose high ratings tended to make him valued despite his rather populist, non-BBC air. However only Carla Lane was trusted enough to be allowed to write from a woman's point of view, and then only after writing *The Liver Birds* for, literally, years. This was despite the fact that sitcoms were traditionally watched more by women than men (BBCWAC, unpublished Survey of Audience Data, September, 1982)

Tunstall notes that "the producer's role was traditionally conceived as male" and that men dominated the Light Entertainment Department at this time (Tunstall, 1993, p.6). Women writers complained that male executives had little knowledge of women's sexuality and emotions and that the culture of the department was such that they were under no pressure to find out. They claim the men in charge were suspicious of work written with a female sensibility which they feared would not be acceptable to audiences. Furthermore, women found the male-dominated department intimidating and difficult to infiltrate and they were uncomfortable pushing themselves forward in macho surroundings. Comedy actress Sheila Hancock complains that when making her show *Now Seriously, It's Sheila Hancock* in 1972 she was told not to do a sketch about racism because it would 'break her image'. "Like most men in authority they

were so out of touch with what was happening to women in the rest of the world” (Banks and Swift, 1987, p.245). Even much later, in 1984, writer Jill Tweedie complained the men in the BBC’s comedy department were ‘cavemen’ and said attempts to film women actresses without makeup were blocked (Banks and Swift, 1987, p.247).

In the early 1980s the BBC was an organisation where women were so much in the minority as to be virtually powerless, and sexism was so endemic that in many cases it was unconscious. Scripts would be censored if they portrayed women characters as ‘unfeminine’, and a woman talking openly about sex was frowned on. Instead female sitcom characters were expected to ruminate endlessly on romance. Lesbians did not exist, and unattractive female characters were avoided because it was felt audiences did not want to see them. Moreover, any introspection by male characters was treated as somewhat suspect (Hyem, 1987, pp. 151-163). Actress Barbara Windsor claims Dennis Main Wilson told her she was too attractive to be funny, telling her “in this country you’ve got to look like Hattie Jacques, Irene Handl or Thora Hird” (Banks and Swift, 1987, p.233). Main Wilson believed that “there is this funny thing, the English do not laugh at their women” (Main Wilson, 1991). Cotton himself stresses there was no overt prejudice against women writers within the corporation - a funny script was a funny script - but admits women were not particularly sought out or nurtured: “If they turned up, they turned up” (Cotton, 2001). Certainly male executives and producers would be more likely to be drawn to comedy written from a male perspective than that written from a woman’s point of view because that was the world they understood.

Jill Hyem also describes the difficulties women experienced breaking into the male-dominated world of the Light Entertainment Department in which a writer’s next project would probably be discussed in the bar over a pint. The truth of this tends to be confirmed by Bill Cotton’s advice on how to get on:

“Sometimes you might have to go and stand in a bar and speak to a fella. If he’d had a hard day and you wanted to get something from him you had to wait until he’d had a couple of reasonable drinks and then talk to him, and maybe decide ‘I don’t think I’ll continue with this, I’ll get him on

another day'. But you had to work out how to get on yourself. Nobody was going to offer it on a plate" (Cotton, 2001).

The lack of women writers probably also exacerbated the shortage of strong female roles for actresses. The fact that sitcoms tended to be about families, which contain women, did not seem to make much difference to this problem. James Gilbert complained he had tried to get writers to write for women, "but their natural inclination always seems to be to write for men" (*Television Today*, 1976), and Andy Medhurst points out that in the endemically domestic British sitcom, most of the female characters, such as the long-suffering June Medford, were mere "feeds, butts or soothers of masculine egos" (Medhurst, 1987).

As Buscombe points out, television is relentless in its search for material, and this "ceaseless appetite for product" inevitably "leads towards the standardisation of output" (Buscombe, 1980, p.7). Although he was mainly referring to the standardisation of genres, the comment also applies to content. The financial risks involved in making sitcoms made it less likely that radical, edgy sitcoms would appear on screen. Although not as expensive as drama, the genre is still costly and an unfunny sitcom attracts derision, whereas drama is seen more as a matter of personal taste. Confident, competent producers and executives such as Michael Mills and Dennis Main Wilson were prepared to nurture new writers including Carla Lane, Raymond Allen, who wrote *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, and John Sullivan. However, on the whole, there was not much incentive for innovation because tried and tested formulas were consistently popular with audiences. The same types of shows by the same small pool of writers appeared again and again. This was not necessarily because of any ideological aversion on the part of the BBC to something new, but because executives had mortgages to pay and wanted to keep their jobs. They naturally went with what they were reasonably confident would work.

The relative ease with which dud sitcoms can be spotted (nobody laughs) encouraged executives to play safe by going with established writers who delivered the goods in the past. Subsequently, relatively little work by new talent, which may have approached sexual issues in a new way, found its way onto the screen. Screenwriter Keith Pottage believed department heads were frightened of hiring new talent because

then “if shows fail they get the blame” (Pottage, 1987). Comedy writer Laurence Marks complained “executives are happy with figures they get for *Terry and June* or *Benny Hill* and shy away from adventurous comedy” (Dugdale, 1987). These views could be written off as the sour grapes of frustrated writers, but their truth tends to be confirmed by executives and official BBC advice to writers. Bill Cotton suggests it was considered to be so obvious it was taken for granted: “Successful writers bred further success. I mean, that’s life” (Cotton 2001). Controller of Entertainment at United Productions Graham Stuart said executives see comedy as “a risky option with only a slim chance of survival – unless, of course, the words David Jason and David Croft figure in some way in the credit list” (Stuart, 1999). Associate producer of comedy at Central, Mark Bussell, believes a shortage of new talent meant established writers such as Lane and Esmonde and Larbey get stale without “the pressure of young writers coming up behind them” (Leavy, 1992). Michael Grade complained at the end of the 1970s that “old established talents are reshuffled: last year’s model is being dressed up as new” (Grade, 1979). Official advice warned “every encouragement is given to new writers in this field (sitcom), but as it is the most demanding type of writing, proven established professionals are, naturally, approached for new work” (Longmate, 1991, p.24).

This is not to say the BBC was not prepared to experiment. As already noted some 1970s shows dealt with controversial themes, and the BBC then, as now, will persevere with new sitcoms, usually giving them a second season to prove themselves even if the first season failed. It helped that the corporation did not have to please advertisers and at this time there were several slots in the schedule, such as opposite *World in Action* (1963-98), where sitcoms could reasonably expect good ratings. Furthermore, edgier sitcoms could be eased onto screens via the minority channel BBC2. All this goes some way to explaining why the BBC has had so much success with its sitcoms. Tunstall notes: “The prevailing slow unfolding of comedy series, as well as the centrality of the writer, have favoured the BBC which has always tended to take a longer-term and more literary view of television” (Tunstall, 1993, p.130).

But on the whole controversial subject matters such as prison or divorce were rendered anodyne. Negus remarks that the aim of cultural production is not so much “sudden bursts of innovations, but the continual production of familiarity and

newness.” Programme makers must work with “recognisable codes, conventions, and expectations” (Negus, 1998, p.362). Ellis believes this familiarity provides “security, both for the industry and for the audiences” (Ellis, 2004, p.276). If this is true of television generally, it is certainly true of the BBC, which frequently has to justify its existence by pointing to its audience share. Gallagher believes the threat from ITV led to standardisation of output, because its “guaranteed the viewers a predictable programme and guaranteed the BBC an audience” (Gallagher, 1982, p.158). The pushing of boundaries was far more likely at “safe times” such as periods of economic stability or when charter renewal was not an issue. Ultimately, the middle ground was considered sacred at the BBC, although clearly the location of the middle ground can and does change through time. Huw Wheldon, citing *Hamlet* as an example, was careful to stress that edgy or risqué subject matter does not necessarily have to be edgy or risqué in its treatment. *Hamlet*, with its themes of incest, murder and mental illness, is considered suitable for schoolchildren (Wheldon, 1967, pp.8-9). 1970s sitcom output was dominated by superbly written and acted, yet not particularly ideologically challenging, middlebrow sitcoms such as *Porridge* and *The Good Life* in which pretension, pomposity, randiness and radicalism were all gently laughed at. *Citizen Smith* even took the sting out of violent revolution. In 1974, *Radio Times* reviewer Jonathan Raban noticed how sitcoms “raid life like bomb-disposal squads. They go into dangerous territory and render it cosy” (Raban, 1974). Morris, in a book published by the BBC, puts this down to the prevailing “misty liberalism” in British broadcasting; “The decency barrier, vapid as it sometimes seems, usually proves impenetrable to the shock waves of extremism” (Morris, 1987, p.20).

External Influences on Content: The Audience and the Press

The BBC does not exist in a vacuum; it is part of the real world. During the 1970s a particular problem for the predominantly male television executives, who sought to capture shifts in the public mood, was how to portray changes in sexuality and sexual behaviour without alienating audiences. American producers such as Norman Lear, who managed to pull off this trick in shows such as *All in the Family*, a US version of *Till Death Us Do Part*, flourished. In America, feedback from the audience in terms of letters, fan magazines and so on was important, but it was the ability to deliver

mass audiences, and so attract advertisers, that mattered, making the ratings the ultimate measure of success. Programme makers needed to “internalise the desires of advertisers” (Gitlin, 1994, p. 253). For the BBC, advertisers were not part of the equation. But BBC executives shared with their American counterparts a need to please mass audiences. Within the BBC, the rationale for the Light Entertainment Department was that it would provide the broad entertainment base upon which shows designed to appeal to minority interest could rest. If the BBC was to remain relevant it had to keep abreast of changes in public taste.

The filming of light entertainment in front of live audiences recreates the shared experience of music hall, nightclub or local rep. It was therefore unsurprising that of all the people to whom Bakewell and Garnham talked in 1970, comedy and variety producers “felt more in touch with mass public taste than other programme-makers” (Bakewell and Garnham, 1970, p.53). Bill Cotton considered taking risks to be somewhat of a luxury because “I wanted the Light Entertainment Department to produce a body of work that the average licence payer would enjoy seeing” (Cotton, 2004) and for Dennis Main Wilson *Till Death Us Do Part* was a form of political programming the masses could digest: “By some peculiar, quite non-intellectual, circumstances (Garnett) became some sort of voice of authority because at least he spoke a language they could understand” (Bakewell and Garnham, 1970, p.59).

If the tone of sitcom in the 1970s, and of comedy generally, was less confrontational than in the previous decade, this could have been a response to the times and the perceived desire of the audience. The political landscape at this time was rocky, with rising world oil prices fuelling recession, general elections happening in quick succession and industrial unrest provoking strikes. The optimistic feel of the 1960s had drained away. Many felt the emphasis on individual self-fulfilment in that decade had led to nothing but promiscuity and the breaking down of societal structures such as the family. Light entertainment programme makers thus faced the challenge of acknowledging changes that had had a profound impact on society while at the same time reassuring audiences that everything was going to be all right. Writing in 1975 and quoting Bill Cotton, David Croft, Frank Muir and James Gilbert, Joan Bakewell concluded that in bad times people wanted to be “entertained and comforted, not challenged” (Bakewell, 1975). So, in a time in which stable family units seemed to be

under real threat, the audience was given shows in which characters' problems dealing with the perils of the outside world were eased by the support of reassuringly happy families and stable marriages.

Some felt it was a natural inclination of the British to want comfort programming. Head of comedy Michael Mills said the British "like mothers-in-law and kippers, old friends whom they'll stick to through thick and thin" (Hutchinson, 1971). *The Listener's* Michael Poole wrote in 1984 that comedy tends to poke fun at the new and frightening because "audiences tend to laugh at what confirms them in their own identity and reassures them about their own place in the world" (Poole, 1984). Actor Terry Scott was convinced his sitcom *Terry and June* was popular because of, not despite, its lack of cleverness and sophistication: "We succeed because we are so decent and average" (Simons, 1982). Some comedy can retain this comforting quality for years. *Last of the Summer Wine* has remained popular for more than 30 years and writer Roy Clarke positively revels in descriptions of his work as 'unchallenging'; "Nothing terribly frightening happens. I don't frighten the horses" (Minogue, 1995). But typically comedy can reassure or provoke depending on the social climate of the country. In the 1970s comedy tended to gently mock the new and frightening. The middle aged men writing and producing sitcoms in that decade could take female and homosexual sexual behaviour and render it harmless so that shared fears of the vast swathe of middle England viewers could be assuaged. Frank Muir remarks that in the 1970s a change of government ushered in a new set of problems, making vicious satire seem 'old hat'. Because so much stress is placed upon the writer, he implies, the ability to react to the public mood is up to them:

"You don't know what writers are going to think and people are going to think... and what happens is that the influence of the feelings, the political feeling of the country, affect the writer. So the product is that much better if it's in line and does that much better with the audience because they need that kind of reassurance. It's reassurance against what one's frightened about usually..." (Bakewell and Garnham, 1970, p.69).

Addressing the fears and desires of the audience was important, but viewers had far less direct impact upon the content of shows. Producers stressed they preferred to trust

their own gut instincts and the ability of their writers rather than any formal research. At the initial planning stages of a new sitcom, there were rarely focus groups or test screenings. Even if there were, producers were quite capable of ignoring the results. David Croft describes how the negative results of a series of test screenings for *Dad's Army*, held because Paul Fox was worried about "taking the mickey out of England's finest hour", were quietly ignored. Croft "didn't let anyone see the results and we went ahead just the same" (*Laughter in the House*, ep.1). Harking back to the good old days of the 1970s, and comparing them with the more convoluted process of getting comedy to the screen in subsequent eras, scriptwriter Dick Sharples believes: "some of the best and most memorable sitcom series were produced by what was a simple double-act of writer plus producer/director acting on their totally subjective gut instinct of what was funny. Not only to themselves, but hopefully to a few million television viewers" (Sharples, 1994). Veteran producer Beryl Vertue agrees: "How do I know if something is funny? If I laugh" (Treneman, 1997). Bill Cotton takes a dim view of focus groups: "To hell with that. I know more about what the public would want than a focus group does without any question because I'm paid to know more" (Cotton, 2001). This skill, he suggests, comes from talking to people. It was by using this gut instinct, and trusting in the vision of writers, that British programme-makers believed they could respond to perceived changes in society.

Burns suggests, however, that this stated reliance on gut instinct was merely wishful thinking and did not necessarily equate with a real knowledge of the audience. Ratings and audience appreciation figures were more important than many BBC producers and executives would care to admit, he claims. When he examined at first hand the workings of the BBC in the late 1960s he discovered a highly departmentalised organisation, with each department priding itself on its professionalism. Each group of workers had strong, although not necessarily the same, ideas about the role of the BBC, mixed with a subconscious defensive hostility towards the public shared by many public service industries. This, he suggests, showed itself in feelings of contempt towards audiences and a tendency for programme makers to avoid "personal involvement" (Burns, 1977, p.134) by offloading the burden of having to think about the people actually watching shows. This involved programme-makers letting management worry about what the audience thought, while at the same time protecting themselves by jealously guarding their own

professionalism and artistic integrity. It also led to them studying ratings and audience appreciation figures to gauge the popularity of the programmes they were making. Quoting one senior executive, he points out that before competition there seemed to be no evidence of “people at the top of the Corporation know, or indeed caring, what the audiences makes of the service it receives.” (Burns, 1977, p.140.) After competition audience appreciation figures became much more important, and a low one could cause an atmosphere of dejection at a recording. Burns found little evidence, however, that much attempt was made to discover why the figure was low. .

But ratings and AI figures could be problematic. Ratings, of course, gave an indication of overall numbers, but it often took two or three series for audiences to really warm to shows – *Fawlty Towers* and *Dad's Army* both got low ratings for their first series. Audience Appreciation Indexes, or Reaction Indexes (R.I.s), were often more useful because they showed how much those that did watch enjoyed the programme. Sydney Lotterby could tell *Porridge* was a resounding success, for example, by the fact that the first series received an audience of 14 million and a high Reaction Index of 72. The BBC's well-developed audience research department also asked specific questions on what it was about the programme the audience liked. So Lotterby knew that the majority of those asked felt the script and performances were excellent and that it was “a simple idea, brilliantly executed” (BBCWAC R9/7/164, AR report, 4/4/75). Audience Appreciation Indexes had to be approached with caution, however, because a subversive, groundbreaking show could have a polarising effect. *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*, for example, had an above-average appreciation index, but 10 per cent of viewers rated it on the bottom two scales. Subsequently, using this method, the middle-brow, well-executed but ideologically unchallenging shows would be perceived as the greatest successes.

The press has traditionally been thorough in its scrutiny of the BBC's sitcom output, taking the view that if ordinary people have to pay a licence fee for something as trivial as comedy they should damn well expect to get a laugh out of it. Even in what many believe to be golden eras of TV comedy, critics have often maintained shows just aren't as funny as they used to be. This interest has meant that what could have been ignored as a lightweight genre has had its fair share of critical attention. However, newspaper reviews could be misleading where certain shows were

concerned. Some sitcoms that went on to become popular with audiences and well received by critics garnered very bad reviews upon their first outing. Again, *Fawlty Towers* is a case in point. Early reviews were less than enthusiastic, and viewing figures low.

Letters to the press, the *Radio Times* and to the programme makers themselves also gave a good indication of how a show was received, although Bill Cotton maintains he did not need to read all the letters because he preferred talking to everyday members of the public and just “getting a feel” of their lives. He would already have sensed the public mood, “and so would everybody else” (Cotton, 2001). Carla Lane, however, believes letters from the public affected what she wrote: “...I find myself inhibited because certain people wrote letters in. My words are watched” (Burn, 1996). Certainly writers did respond when it became clear certain characters were becoming popular: the Mr Humphries character in *Are You Being Served* and Margo in *The Good Life* were both written up in response to audience feedback and press coverage. It seems likely, though, that the real impact was less direct. There is no evidence to suggest that writers consistently and deliberately changed their approach to their work as a result of feedback. The BBC, however, was more likely to employ writers it felt were in tune with the public mood.

Conclusion

BBC Television's Light Entertainment Department in the 1970s was a place full of contradictions. A high-minded public-service corporation that nevertheless was forced to develop audience-pleasing comedy, it had a system of hierarchies and controls that it colluded in letting its producers ignore. It aimed to create programmes for the broadest range of people possible, yet sitcoms were largely made by the same writers and producers and populated by a narrow range of characters. Furthermore the department allowed writers great freedom, yet produced little that really challenged accepted morality and sexual mores.

In just 20 years BBC television developed from an unimportant backwater of the corporation to one of the most important programme-making organisations in the world. A succession of high-minded liberal bosses, a strong ethos of professionalism and an ability to pitch its shows to the middle ground all helped in this success. Producers and writers were held in the highest regard, and had a fair degree of autonomy, but were encouraged to see their work as primarily light-hearted and entertaining rather than as social or political criticism.

Happy with the ratings for *Porridge* or *The Good Life*, executives naturally wanted more of the same. Producers felt they knew their audiences, and, backed up by audience research, steered writers in certain directions. At a time of continuing social change, this tended to be towards reassurance rather than confrontation. With occasional exceptions, such as *Till Death Us Do Part*, writers were complicit in this, valuing the ability to entertain audiences and make them laugh above all else. They also knew they would be likely to get further commissions if their work was acceptable. There is no evidence of executives ruthlessly crushing attempts by writers to push back the boundaries. Rather, because of the BBC's liberal, anti-censorship bias, it seems likely any subject matter would have at least been considered, with funniness the main criterion for going ahead with the project. Nevertheless, in this system writers were gently encouraged to create warm, funny, unchallenging programmes to appeal to family audiences. Subsequently, these were exactly the type

of programme that tended to get made. In return, audiences, their fears and insecurities gently assuaged, watched in their millions.

CHAPTER THREE

David Croft and Are You Being Served?

Are You Being Served? (1972-1985) achieved large audiences throughout its long run and repeats still get respectable viewing figures today. Stylistically, however, it is unlike the majority of sitcoms written for the BBC at this time and certain aspects of its creation differ. This chapter examines the creation, content and reception of *Are You Being Served?* It explores how the background and working practices of David Croft and the comic tradition within which he worked helped determine the content and style of the show. It also assesses the extent and nature of the input of actors and BBC executives. Textual analysis, largely focusing on language, determines how *Are You Being Served?* establishes what is 'normal' in terms of sexuality. The chapter also reveals how viewers responded to the text and whether the show succeeded in engaging with its audience at a time of rapidly changing social and sexual mores.

The Writers

Writer and producer David Croft was born into an acting family and, following a stint in the army, became an actor, singer and lyricist. This was followed by work as a theatre director before a move into television in 1961, where he wrote and produced *The Eggheads*. He went on to produce shows such as *Hugh and I* (1962-68), *Beggar My Neighbour* (1966-68) and *Up Pompeii* (1969-70) and by the end of the 1960s was riding high after the critical and ratings success of his sitcom *Dad's Army*, co-written with Jimmy Perry. *Are You Being Served?* and the shows which followed it such as *Hi-de-Hi* (1980-88) and *'Allo 'Allo* (1982-92) all bore his unmistakable trademarks. They were bawdy, 'saucy' shows which relied heavily on double entendre and catchphrases. They were ensemble pieces set in the past and the jokes went near the knuckle while somehow maintaining an air of innocence. Croft wrote them as part of a two-man team, usually with Perry or Jeremy Lloyd, and produced them himself.

In 1973 Croft was approached by actor and writer Jeremy Lloyd who had an idea for a comedy series set in a department store, based upon his experiences of working as a

management trainee in Simpson's of Piccadilly. Lloyd's grandparents had brought him up after his father ran off with another woman, and when war broke out he was packed off to boarding school. This was followed by jobs in a lamp bulb factory, Simpson's and as a paint salesman. His screenplay, *What A Whopper!*, was made into a film starring Adam Faith in 1961 and he wrote shows for television, including *Six-Five Special* (1957-58) and *The Dickie Henderson Show* (1963-65). He also acted in the *Billy Cotton Show* (1956-68) and in various films in which he played an upper-class-twit. In the early 1970s, following a stint acting and writing for American television, he wrote the outline for *Are You Being Served?* He has been married several times and in his memoirs presents himself as a sexually liberated person (Lloyd, 1993). Bill Cotton, who had worked with Lloyd before and knew him well, describes him as a "saucy bugger" who liked to test the limits of how far he could go in his writing (Cotton, 2001), an opinion echoed by David Croft (Croft, 2002).

The Actors

David Croft tends to favour ensemble pieces rather than star vehicles. He likes to use the same actors repeatedly (Croft, 1997) and, according to actress Wendy Richard, is a "genius for casting and must have the most phenomenal brain when it comes to recalling the various skills of those he's used before" (Richard, 2000, p. 76). None of the cast of *Are You Being Served?* were huge stars, but they were valued by the writers as very professional actors who were able to work well with this type of material: according to Croft, "they understood comedy acting, that sort of comedy. They'd all been in theatre, in farce, things like that. They knew how to do it" (Croft, 2002).

Lloyd believes Frank Thornton (Captain Peacock), John Inman (Mr Humphries) and long-time stage actor Arthur Brough (Mr Grainger) were all playing variations on their normal selves (Rigelsford *et. al.*, 1995, p.107). Mollie Sugden (Mrs Slocombe) had played a similar part as a snobby middle-aged woman in *The Liver Birds*. She had met David Croft some time before when she worked for Tyne-Tees Television and he created the role of Mrs Slocombe for her: "After David got to the BBC, whenever a part suited, he employed me," she said (Abramson, 2001). Trevor Bannister (Mr

Lucas) had acted on the stage and had played small roles in television shows. Croft was concerned that Bannister was too old for the part of Mr Lucas, and initially the actor was uncertain how to play the role, but rapidly settled into it. Wendy Richard (Miss Brahms) had had minor parts in various television shows, often playing ‘dolly birds’, and had worked for Croft before in *Hugh and I* and *Dad’s Army*. Lloyd says that rather than being a variation on her normal self, Miss Brahms was almost exactly the same as Richard. Richard says she was trusted to “deliver the character of Miss Brahms as I saw fit, by instinct” and resisted the temptation to make her too much of a bimbo (Richard, 2000, p. 63).

Initially Trevor Bannister was intended to be the show’s star. He and Molly Sugden shared top billing and their names alternated at the top of the cast list each week. However, the writers increased the importance of John Inman’s role as Mr Humphries mincing across a set proved so amusing to audiences. They became aware that he was perceived by the public as the real star when his theatrical work outside the show became wildly popular (Croft, 2002). Furthermore, the other characters were clearly also as important to the show as Mr Lucas and the series quickly became very much an ensemble piece. Richard claims the cast members got on well with each other, making ensemble work easy (Richard, 2000, p.75).

The characters emerged from a combination of the writing and the actors’ personalities. Croft admits that he would “always go for actors first, then adapt my characters to suit them” (Croft, 1997). But Lloyd and Croft agree that the actors ‘seldom’ added lines (Lloyd, 1993, p 123):

“We didn’t encourage that. Actors are supposed to act. When they start suggesting comedy it’s usually something they’ve done before and has worked. In the read-through they used to get a lot of laughs and there was not much input. They would occasionally suggest business, physical stuff, and we were very grateful for that” (Croft, 2002).

This ‘physical stuff’ seems to have been the actors’ main input. For example, it was Inman himself who made the Mr Humphries character more camp. He came up with the idea of the mincing walk, and became closely identified with the role,

subsequently taking similar roles in other comedy shows, starring in a Lloyd-written Australian version of *Are You Being Served?* and making many camp performances in pantomime.

John Inman's voice and camp gestures and Molly Sugden's squat physicality and upwardly-mobile accent both add a great deal to what is already present in the script. Bill Cotton, despite a few reservations about the saucy nature of the show, recognised that the right actor could make all the difference:

“When it's on the page it's one thing and when the series is first performed the artists have not actually developed the character. But when it's an established show that everybody knows and they have got an established way of playing it it's amazing what you can let them say. But it's all a matter of growth. It grows” (Cotton, 2001).

The Production Process

As well as to Croft, Lloyd gave the idea for the show to Shaun O'Riordan at ATV, who was unenthusiastic but nevertheless retained an option. Croft, meanwhile, liked the idea. The pair refined the show together, got it back from ATV, took it to the BBC and were given the go-ahead to make a pilot. Croft changed the format by adding the female characters. This, he felt, would add conflict and make it more interesting. The two men subsequently worked on scripts together, although Lloyd tended to write the 'gags'.

The pilot sat on the BBC's shelves for a while, but was finally broadcast as part of the BBC's *Comedy Playhouse* series when the cancellation of the Munich Olympics coverage meant a filler was quickly needed. The BBC did not give it any advanced publicity, it received a lukewarm response from viewers and from BBC executives and further episodes were not commissioned. Head of light entertainment Bill Cotton finally agreed to a series when a Johnny Speight show fell through and Croft persuaded him that *Are You Being Served?* could replace it quickly and cheaply. The fact that the show was entirely studio-based kept costs down considerably (the programme's “economic use of the studio” was noted by the Programme Review

Board (BBCWAC TVWPR, 19/5/75)). But, according to Croft, Cotton gave permission only if “the poof” wasn’t in it and as long as Mrs Slocombe’s pussy was not mentioned too frequently (Webber, 1998, p15). Croft refused to remove “the poof” (Mr Humphries) because he was one of the key characters, and used the ‘pussy’ joke extensively, but got away with it. This was probably partly because the audience did not seem offended by the references and partly because Croft was his own producer, thus entirely removing a possibly censorious executive layer. Furthermore, Cotton denies he would have been so heavy-handed as to actually censor the show; “I wasn’t that type of operator” (Cotton, 2001). In total 64 episodes of *Are You Being Served?* were made and it ran from 1973 to 1985, spawning a Blackpool stage show and a film, which was set in Spain but filmed at Elstree Studios in just six weeks. According to Richard, the decision to stop the show was Croft’s because he wanted to end it “while it is at the top” (Richard, 2000, p.112). Croft says he had largely stopped writing the show towards the end, preferring to let Lloyd do the majority of the writing while he concentrated on producing (Croft, 2002).

There was a six-day production cycle for each episode of *Are You Being Served?*, starting with a read-through. This helped identify potential difficulties with the script, set or costumes. Any location filming would then be done, followed by rehearsals and blocking. A rehearsal would be held in front of the cameras on shooting day to enable camera shots to be lined up. The show was then be taped in the evening in front of a live studio audience. Scenes were taped in order. Laughter was not dubbed, but if a scene was taped more than once the biggest laugh would be used (Croft, 2002). This was a common practice used on many shows. Hours were spent on rehearsal, but the whole show was often taped in an hour, unlike other sitcoms that could take as long as three, thus making it more of a theatrical experience for the cast and audience and encouraging spontaneity from both. Taping rarely stopped once it was started, so mistakes were often left in. John Inman said the cast member’s theatrical backgrounds meant they were not daunted by this pressure: “We were used to getting it right the first time” (The Insider, online). Each season took seven weeks to rehearse and tape.

Croft and Lloyd suspected the BBC was never that keen on *Are You Being Served?* because of its risqué style and content. According to Croft, “many people thought the style of humour was like the *Carry On* films, not the sort of thing the BBC should do”

(Webber, 1998, p35). But they believed the BBC's comedy department's working methods at that time worked in their favour. The show was unlike other sitcoms traditionally produced by the BBC, which tended to be more middlebrow and naturalistic in tone as opposed to Croft's bawdy offerings. But Bill Cotton was willing to trust both Croft and Lloyd and his own hunch that somehow the series could work. He also had the power to see this hunch through and leave Croft alone. The risk was lessened by the fact the show was entirely set in the studio and so was relatively cheap to make. "When the BBC ordered a second series," Croft recalls, "I suddenly thought the show was a triumph. It was a great time to be writing. The BBC never asked what we were doing: we'd just turn the scripts in, the actors would arrive for rehearsals and before we knew it an episode had been recorded" (Webber, 1998, p15).

This trust paid off as the show grew in popularity, especially after it stopped being scheduled opposite *Coronation Street* (1960-). "I must hand it to the BBC," says Mollie Sugden, "They nursed it along and everything worked out all right in the end" (Abramson, 2001). When the second series was broadcast executives were entirely happy with its ratings and its ability to "click with a mass audience" (BBCWAC TVWPR, 16/4/75). Bill Cotton said it was "doing what it had been placed in the schedule to do" (BBCWAC TVWPR, 2/4/75), with high viewing figures of 12.5 million "helping to raise viewing figures for the entire evening" (BBCWAC TVWPR, 16/4/75). He agreed that the third series should contain eight rather than five programmes.

Because Croft was producing his own work, he had a greater degree of creative freedom. According to him, the BBC was making so many sitcoms at that time executives had little choice but to let experienced producers get on with it:

"I think another reason for the show's success is that nobody tampered with the script and nobody was afraid they were going to be axed. This relaxed atmosphere came across. Today there are more re-writers than writers and the job's not creative" (Morgan, 1997).

Croft denies he was subject to censorship, although there is some evidence he may have been nudged in a less ribald direction by the BBC from time to time. In 1978 the

controller of BBC1 Bill Cotton complained the show ought to be “twice as funny and half as smutty” and said “steps were being taken to remedy this” (BBCWAC TVWPR, 22/11/78). There is no evidence of overt or extensive censorship, however, and Croft specifically denies any interference, claiming he was his own censor. Croft says he and Lloyd were careful not to go too far. “I think in those days one had one’s own ideas of where the barriers were and we went as close as we could to pushing them a bit further. It was always innuendo, it was never blatant” (Croft, 2002).

Croft believes this is the difference between *Are You Being Served?* and a modern sexually risqué sitcom such as *Men Behaving Badly* (1992-98), which openly discusses sexual matters. One is ‘clean’ smut and the other is ‘dirty’ smut, he argues, and, in his moral view, one is acceptable and the other is not; “I’m harking back to a gentler era. I write ordinary, non-controversial comedy which gives families a good laugh. They know nobody’s going to say ‘shag’ (Rampton, 1996). Deliverer of many of the naughtiest, double-meaning-packed lines, John Inman, agrees:

“Yes, it is risqué and full of double entendres, but it contains what we call an honest vulgarity and ‘self-cleaning’ jokes. By that I mean the rudeness is all in the mind of the viewer and eventually turns out to be above board. The scriptwriters Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft were careful to make sure of this” (Morgan, 1997).

Lloyd agrees that because of the show’s obvious popularity the BBC chose to trust the writers in matters of taste:

“As we always had an overflowing audience for (*Are You Being Served?*, the BBC) just knew that they had a successful show and allowed us carte blanche to do what we liked. They relied on our taste not to upset anybody, and as far as I know, we never did” (Rigelsford *et. al.*, 1995, p.103).

The show ran for 13 years and spawned spin-offs, including a stage show and a film. There was even an Australian version in 1980-81, although John Inman was the only original cast member.

Critical and Audience Reaction

The evidence suggests the majority of the contemporary audience accepted *Are You Being Served?* in an uncomplicated manner. As a result it changed very little through the years. Croft says he did not consciously change the way he wrote it and felt under no pressure to keep up with any changing societal trends (Croft, 2002). There is no evidence of women objecting to the representations of female characters, although some gay members of the contemporary audience were more hostile about the character of Mr Humphries. This, however, does not seem to have unduly concerned anyone involved in the making of the programme who felt no pressure to change the way the character was portrayed. Furthermore, the cast remained fairly stable, which helped keep the tone of the show consistent. Lloyd was doing the majority of the writing towards the end of the show's life, and Croft believes this meant that the show had less depth. It did not change greatly stylistically or in its characterisations or themes, however.

Critical reviews at the time were largely positive, becoming more so as the show progressed. This suggested to BBC executives that they were right to trust Croft's ability to gauge the limits of public taste. Croft's view that the show was merely following on in the tradition of seaside-postcard style humour seemed to have been shared by many critics.

Reviews of the first series were mixed. The *Morning Star* hated the show (7 April, 1973) and *The Times* accused it of "vulgar knockabout and silly jokes – old silly jokes" (15 March, 1973). But many reviewers praised its down-to-earth smuttiness and were forced to admit that, even if it wasn't to their taste, it seemed to appeal to the public. In 1973, at the beginning of the show's run, *The Daily Express*, rather than being shocked by the liberal use of double entendres, used *Are You Being Served?* to illustrate its claim that shows were becoming far too tame. It was unhappy that there seemed to be nothing on television likely to put the wind up Mary Whitehouse (10 February, 1973). The cast was unhappy about the lukewarm reviews received by the first series, but Wendy Richard says the actors remained positive about the show:

“(The reviews) did not dampen our spirits; the whole cast were right behind David and Jeremy. We were convinced that if we had the chance to make another series, Grace Brothers department store and its staff would, in time, win the hearts of British viewers” (Richard, 2000, pp. 76-77).

John Inman believes the show was a “slow burner” which took until at least the third series to really take off, after which it became “huge” (The Insider, online). Croft was largely happy with the reviews and secure in the knowledge the BBC would support him. He did not consider reviews an irrelevance, and did read them, but claimed to trust his own ability as a writer to engage an audience more than the opinions of journalists:

“(Reviews) were good as a rule and I think one was conscious of the ones that weren’t good. You had praise an awful lot. The worry was that senior executives would read those rather than see the programme therefore one was worried about a bad review. But the BBC was very good at making its own mind up. The executives there had confidence that what they wanted to show was the right thing and that it would come through and the result was that you did get long-running series. Nowadays 18 programmes is a career” (Croft, 2002).

Thus the show, cushioned by the self-belief of its creators and staff, continued uncompromised. By the second and subsequent series reviews were more wholeheartedly positive. *Broadcast* referred to it as “nicely camp” (8 March, 1974) and *Television Today* said that despite its ‘dated’ air and schoolboy humour it “works splendidly” because of its good characters and clever production and direction: “There will always be a place for comedy in the vein of *Are You Being Served?* It stems from a long tradition of distinctly British humour which is unlikely to die out” (March 10, 1977). Most critics similarly saw the show as typical English humour, saucy rather than dirty. By 1979, even *The Listener* was forced to admit that, despite its low production values and lavatorial humour, the audience seemed to love *Are You Being Served?*, perhaps because the characters “exude that sentimental camaraderie which is the core of so much British humour” (6 December, 1979). A similar conclusion was

reached the same year by the *Evening Standard's* reviewer, who was forced to admit that, even though the show could be dismissed as “pandering to the lowest common denominator”, that “when all’s said and done a great mass of people will switch on this Friday” (27 June, 1979). By the end of its run, it was being treated as a British institution and *The Guardian* compared it favourably to Donald McGill seaside postcards (April 2, 1985).

The huge popularity with audiences was confirmed by BBC audience research. This found in 1974 that *Are You Being Served?* was considered “good, clean fun” and a “good laugh” by most. The majority felt it was “unpretentious comedy of ‘British seaside lineage’” but “a substantial minority felt it was ‘fair to middling’ and a small minority felt it was ‘corny’, ‘crude’ or ‘moronic’” (BBCWAC R9/7/128, AR report March/April 1974). This largely positive, but somewhat mixed, reception mirrored the early press reviews, but, like the critics, the audience reaction became more straightforwardly positive as the show progressed. By 1975 the BBC Programme Review Board was reporting 14 million viewers and a Reaction Index of 66. A year later the figures were 13 million and a very high RI of 72. This success, BBC1 controller Brian Cowgill felt, was due to “the skill of David Croft as a producer” (BBCWAC WPR, 19/5/76). The report goes on to say that the goings-on at Grace Brothers were considered “extremely funny, inoffensive entertainment ... the situations were ‘too far fetched’ for some, and a few even complained of innuendoes they disliked. But most of the viewers were united in praising an excellent cast, a satisfactory production and a most amusing script.” By 1978 James Gilbert was marvelling about how much Croft could get away with in terms of smutty jokes and at how few and far between complaints were (BBCWAC WPR, 20/12/78). Eventually, by 1983, *Are You Being Served?* was attracting 15 million viewers.

Although the clear majority of viewers and critics praised the show, there were a few people who found *Are You Being Served?* offensive. A 1978 letter from Miss Pye of Ipswich to the *Radio Times* which described it as one of the “really funny programmes which the BBC do so very well” (February 18, 1978) was countered the following month with a diatribe by Mr Hemmings from Staffordshire who complained *Are You Being Served?* “pokes fun at girls with big boobs; frustrated widows; randy young men; pompous officials; senile men (lascivious); possible homosexuals; and

men with big ears” (March 18, 1978). There was also a reaction against the show by members of the homosexual community who objected to the character of Mr Humphries. Homosexuality had been legalised six years before the broadcast of the first series of *Are You Being Served?*, and the gay movement was becoming increasingly vocal. Members of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality said the character was “contributing to the television distortion of the image of homosexuals” and that gays were being depicted as “sexually obsessed”, too extravagant in manner and too keen to dress up in drag (Wigg, 1977). *The Times* was also unhappy about John Inman’s portrayal of Mr Humphries as a “head-shaking poofter” (March 15, 1973). However, there is no evidence to suggest that many people outside the homosexual community disapproved of Mr Humphries, and Mr Hemmings’ objection to what he saw as the writers’ ill treatment of various groups seems to have been unusual.

Themes and Representations

Thematically, in terms of sexuality, the show examines the battle of the sexes and the place within society of sexual ‘outsiders’ such as older women and gay men. The show’s subject is the goings-on in the ladies’ and gents’ clothing department of a fictional department store, Grace Brothers. The store is very traditional with a strict hierarchy. Captain Peacock is the floorwalker, acting as a go-between for staff and customers. Mrs Slocombe is in charge of the ladies’ department, assisted by Miss Brahms. The gents’ department is run by the elderly Mr Grainger. Second in command is camp menswear assistant Mr Humphries, while under him is the laddish Mr Lucas. Other characters include the rather pompous department head Mr Rumbold, the militant, working class storeman Mr Harman, various voluptuous secretaries and occasional appearances from the extremely old ‘Young Mr Grace’, who usually has a couple of scantily-clad nurses propping him up. Grace Brothers does not appear to have many customers – instead the show focuses on the interaction between the members of staff.

The writers wanted to create a sitcom in the tradition of the working-class, non-intellectual comedy that they enjoyed. In fact, Croft is vociferous in his belief that comedy should not be intellectual, and he is proud that none of his co-writers had an

O-level between them. *Dad's Army*, which Croft wrote with Jimmy Perry, did have more depth when it came to characterisation, but *Are You Being Served* is a very different type of show and Lloyd's humour tended to be a great deal broader than Perry's.

“We didn't intend to play for sympathy or anything like that. We used those dimensions in some of the other things we wrote, but never in *Are You Being Served*? In *Dad's Army* for instance, the marriage of Mr Manwaring was obviously a disaster and (there was) the relationship in the background (between Mr Wilson and Mrs Pike) – the boy was his son. So we had much more that sort of comedy in *Dad's Army* but Jeremy was a different writer and we didn't concentrate on that. It was the funnies really” (Croft, 2002).

Croft and Lloyd's showbusiness, rather than literary, background fed their love of what they believed to be 'traditional' British humour, such as the *Carry On* films and radio shows like *ITMA* (1939-1949) and *Round the Horne* (1965-1969). This comedy was in turn influenced by the music hall tradition of artists such as Max Miller, who used a great deal of innuendo. This tradition stands in contrast to the more intellectual humour of satire and surrealism (*That Was The Week That Was* (1962-1963), *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-1974)), working-class comedy which was trying to make a social or political point (*The Likely Lads*, *Till Death Us Do Part*) or the theatrical drawing room comedy of a writer such as Alan Ayckbourn, whose style heavily influenced *The Good Life*. The type of comedy that inspired Croft tended to favour ensemble pieces and was innuendo-driven, non-realistic, heavy on 'gags' and fond of catch-phrases and stereotypes. Thus, although the humour of the show was broader than most BBC comedy, rather than merely being dismissed as coarse it could be intellectualised as being part of a long, and very British, comedy tradition. Lloyd compared *Are You Being Served?* to Donald McGill postcards (Lloyd, 1993 p.123), and director Bob Spiers said he valued its traditional British humour:

“I'm very happy to have done it because I think it was a classic bit of old-fashioned British end of the pier humour of a particular kind which we shouldn't lose. It's a bit vulgar, and it's a bit bawdy, and it could be a bit

camp, but nevertheless it's good British humour which sits with me very happily alongside all the other stuff I've done" (Rigelsford *et. al.*, 1995, p.124)

An examination of individual episodes of *Are You Being Served?* reveals the way this tradition fed into the emerging personality traits of the characters and their interaction with each other.

Broadly speaking, in this 'seaside postcard' tradition, women tend to be either battleaxes or dollybirds, depending on their age and marital status. Men, meanwhile, exude an air of sexual frustration. Mr Lucas and Miss Brahms are presented as young and 'sexy' characters. Mr Lucas is a confident, Jack-the Lad type. He has slightly longer hair and slightly scruffier clothes than the other male characters and openly, albeit unsuccessfully, lusts after Miss Brahms. He is dismissive of Mrs Slocombe, who is reduced to a figure of fun because of her age and lack of sexual desirability. The portrayal of Mrs Slocombe is classic stereotyping. British comedy of this type is full of women like her - usually older, asexual and fat. The matron figure played by Hattie Jacques in the *Carry On* films is typical. When these women do attempt to express the sexual side of their nature it is usually represented as embarrassing and somehow 'wrong'. Mrs Slocombe is outwardly staid but her repressed sexual desire and frustration at her lack of sexual activity is detectable and is expressed through her wildly-coloured hair and the occasional inappropriate pass at a male colleague.

One of the criticisms frequently levelled at sitcom is its reliance on stereotypes, and comedy written in this tradition relies heavily on them. But dismissing the characters in *Are You Being Served?* as mere stereotypes is simplistic. Writing about *Carry On* films – in many ways similar in style to *Are You Being Served?* - Marion Jordan points out that it is only in lowbrow cultural forms that such methods are considered unacceptable. In fact, she argues most writers create recognisable types that are defined by external factors, such as their clothing. This is inevitable if the viewer of a two-hour film is to gain any understanding of a fictional character (Jordan, 1983, pp. 312-314). This ambivalence towards stereotyping is shared by Neale, who argues that only focusing on the similarities of stereotypical characters across different texts, instead of their differences and the meanings attached to them in each individual text,

is a mistake because it reduces “the complexity and heterogeneity inherent in a process and its relations to a single, homogenous (and repetitive) function” (Neale, 1979, p.33).

Medhurst and Tuck have argued that sitcom cannot function without stereotype because in order to find a character funny in a 30-minute show the viewer must recognise it as a type. They cite as an example *George and Mildred*, an ITV show featuring the argumentative, but basically loving, relationship between a henpecked husband and his sexually frustrated wife. They argue that initially two-dimensional and stereotypical characters gradually become fleshed-out as the series progresses (Medhurst and Tuck, 1982, pp. 43-44). However, if we apply this theory to the characters in *Are You Being Served?*, and think of them, as Neale suggests, purely in terms of how they function in this particular text, something strange happens. Although these characters are likeable and we respond to them as individuals, we never really get to know them. We learn very little about the private lives of Mr Humphries or Miss Brahms. We never see them outside the store, and they react to situations in exactly the way we would expect. For example, when Mr Lucas taunts Mrs Slocombe about her age or weight, she reacts in comic-violent way – we get no impression she is really wounded or vulnerable. Similarly, when Mr Humphries is accused of being effeminate, it causes no resentment and throws up no awkward questions about his sexuality.

Croft has made it clear that *Are You Being Served?* was not intended to be a character study. Instead his characters are merely pegs upon which to hang gags. They take no offence, feel no pain and seem not to have an inner life at all. In this context stereotyping can be seen as a comic device rather than an example of bad writing. If we drop all our preconceptions we are free to laugh at Mrs Slocombe safe in the knowledge she is not intended to be a realistic representation of womanhood.

However, a certain hostility towards women is inherent in this style of comedy and this comes through despite the writers’ intentions. Even if these characters are not given an inner life, it is difficult for the audience not to continue to try and relate them to the real world. Mrs Slocombe is trapped in the twilight that unattractive older women usually inhabit in male-authored sitcoms of this particular comic tradition. In

this world, once they pass the age of 30 women are no longer dolly birds; the lucky ones become sexless, almost invisible, wives and mothers while the others become frustrated old maids. By the time they wrote the 1981 episode “The Erotic Dreams of Mrs Slocombe”, Croft and Lloyd show Mrs Slocombe as a rather sad character who drinks too much and lusts after Mr Humphries in her sleep (“He’s different in my dreams”). Her sexual desires are quickly dismissed by Captain Peacock: “They do fantasise at that age.” By constantly referring to her ‘pussy’ Croft and Lloyd force us to consider Mrs Slocombe’s sexuality - thus gaining laughs by the dubious means of poking fun at a middle-aged woman’s forlorn and neglected sexual organs. This view is shared by journalist Stuart Jeffries, who describes how, every time the phrase was mentioned, he imagined a “lonely, sex-starved woman on the wrong side of forty at best, lying in a bath of lukewarm water as a raw, steel-grey English morning kept its counsel outside, her pubic hair drifting longingly to the greasy surface, abjectly” (Jeffries, 2000, p. 107). It seems likely that everybody watching the show, apart from, possibly, children, imagined a similar image, albeit fleetingly.

The ‘battleaxe’ characters in popular culture at this time often had responsible jobs that enabled them to find an outlet for their energy and intelligence, but this was usually dismissed as an unattractive tendency to bossiness. This desire to be the boss, suggests frustration at her inability to succeed in the woman’s ‘natural’ sphere – marriage and the home. Looking specifically at Mrs Slocombe, we can see that she is portrayed in a similar way. She is in charge of her department, but she is punished for it by being seen as sexually ridiculous and being forced to live her life alone. Her work is thus of the utmost importance to her. It gives her a status she would not otherwise have, wards off loneliness and means she can survive financially without a man. She is allowed this independence, but in return we are allowed to find her sexuality laughable.

In her feminist study of the representation of women in British comedy, Laraine Porter suggests it is the tendency to construct women solely in terms of their sexual relationship with men and categorise them in terms of their relationship to sexual normalcy that unites these portrayals. Dumb blondes have an excess of “sexual difference” while the tyrant or spinster has a lack of it. She also believes this tendency towards stereotyping is part of the British comic tradition. She cites *Are You Being*

Served? along with other comic creations such as the *Carry On* films and sitcoms such as *George and Mildred* (1976-1979), *Marriage Lines* (1963-1966) and *Steptoe and Son* (Porter, p.71). This assertion is correct, but the ways these very different shows use stereotypes differs greatly in their detail, and each requires its own careful textual study.

Miss Brahm is clearly someone with an excess of sexual difference. She is young, blonde, pretty and slender and usually dressed in short, tight skirts but she cannot be seen as just another example of the bimbo stereotype. It is true that her appearance and the careful manner in which she protects her virginity while exuding sexuality are fairly typical. Croft believes this insistence on chastity reflected reality:

“At the time, yes, undoubtedly. Nowadays you watch television and you’d think everybody’s at it all the time. Well they were in a way in the seventies and eighties but it wasn’t quite so blatant” (Croft, 2002).

Whether or not being a virgin at marriage really was still important in the early 1970s, Croft and Lloyd obviously thought it should appear so, and kept Miss Brahm sexy but pure. Certainly, in this type of comedy, although young women are ‘supposed’ to be sexy, their worth as future marriage material is completely negated if they sleep around. However there is more to Miss Brahm than meets the eye. She is confident of her sexuality and in control of it, and her attractiveness gives her power over the male characters that Mrs Slocombe does not possess. It is possible that the actress played a large part in increasing the complexity of this character. Wendy Richard was anxious for the character not to be seen as a tart, so was careful to portray her as an intelligent woman who knew what she was doing (Richard, 2000, p. 63). But the script makes it clear that Miss Brahm is no empty-headed bimbo, and she stands in contrast to characters such as young Mr Grace’s nurses, who *are* bimbos.

Porter’s claim that British male comic characters are often sexually dysfunctional is certainly true of *Are You Being Served?*. This can be explored through the text’s treatment of sexual politics. Marriage is presented as a rather grim ordeal. In “Fifty Years On” (1976) Mr Grainger talks about taking his wife out to give her “an airing”, before describing how ugly she is. Young women, meanwhile, treat sex as a

commodity. In 'Coffee Morning' (1975), Miss Brahms tells Mrs Slocombe about her date the night before and says she goes out with men just to get a free meal: "I put on a low frock, they have a good look and I get a good nosh". Mrs Slocombe asks why they bother if they don't get anywhere, to which Miss Brahms replies "Once they've made the investment they keep hoping they'll win the jackpot!" Lloyd told Wendy Richard that Miss Brahms was intended to be "typical of girls of her time: great figure, lots of lipstick, high heels, looking for love but thinking they're too good for most men they meet – and being right in that" (Richard, 2000, p. 63). In the next scene Mr Lucas tells Mr Humphries how he plans to remove the door handles of his car before his date that night in order to stop the woman escaping. So, Croft and Lloyd would have us believe, sex is a constant struggle between men who want it and women who don't want to give it. But if men capitulate to women's demands and marry them, the man soon loses interest and the women are doomed to a life of frustration.

Croft and Lloyd, then, created a world with clear rules in which their characters appear to know their place and behave in predictable ways. If we allow external discourses to colour our interpretation, however, the picture changes. We can place these characters in the real world, and discover what the text is really saying about sexuality, by considering contemporary attitudes towards pre-marital sex when examining Mr Lucas' and Miss Brahms' behaviour and the portrayal of the sexes. The writers were showing us a world in which any woman who slept around was dismissed as a tart and doomed never to capture the all-important husband. Mrs Slocombe, for all her protestations about purity, clearly has a libido and look what happened to her – all alone with her pussy. These attitudes fed into, and were strengthened by, a restrictive sexual code imposed on society through much of the century, but by the 1970s this moral code was being eroded. Surveys show that in 1965 only six per cent of 15- to 17-year-old girls had had sex (Marwick, 1998, p. 75), but by 1980 that figure had risen to 46 per cent of female 16-year-olds (Marwick, 1990, p. 249). The increased tendency of both sexes to indulge in sexual intercourse before marriage seems to have been to the writers' regret and, although pre-marital sex may have been prevalent in real life, in the strangely old-fashioned world of *Are You Being Served?* it is not. There, unmarried women may be sexy but they do not indulge in sex. However, this moral oasis can occasionally be invaded by the real

world. In 'Coffee Morning' Mr Humphries gives an unusually cynical speech on the decline of romance since the days when "your heart leapt at the sight of an ankle getting into a Hansom cab. Now it's clunk-click, strip off quick."

The intriguing mix of naivety and crudeness in Croft's sitcoms affects the way we perceive characters. Sue Boyd-Bowman points out the shows are generally set either in the past or in surroundings that are so old-fashioned that they may as well be the past. Moreover, they are obsessed with sex yet are strangely asexual. Writing about another Croft show, *Hi-de-Hi*, Boyd Bowman suggests the show's historical setting makes us watch in a less self-conscious way and enables Croft to exploit traditional stereotypes to get laughs which would be problematic in a more politically correct present. We can enjoy the pleasure without feeling guilty for doing so, because we can distance ourselves from what it is at which we are laughing (Boyd-Bowman, 1982, p.59). I want to explore this idea by looking more closely at the character Mr Humphries.

Mr Humphries is fertile ground for an examination of the portrayal of homosexuality in popular culture. Murray Healey believes that comedy is a better form than drama for portraying homosexuality in a positive light, as there is more room for audiences to negotiate and re-negotiate with gay characters, thus allowing our response to change over time. Whereas in the past Mr Humphries' campness could have been seen as immoral and weak, now it can be seen as a joyous affirmation of difference. A dramatic portrayal of homosexuality in the past, *The Killing of Sister George*, for example, is likely to have been either sinister or tragic and will still come across that way to the modern viewer. We are free to reject this portrayal, but we can no longer engage with it. But Mr Humphries can be seen a positive character because the text portrays him as funny, popular and confident – there is no hint of tragedy or pathos in his character or situation (Healey, 1995, pp. 244-245).

Healey's reading is shared by Leon Hunt, who believes the show carries on the tradition of queer culture previously found within *Carry On* films and "opens up a space – not found in the ITV sitcoms – within the reclaiming of 1970s smut" (Hunt, 1998, p.45). Meanwhile Boyd-Bowman believes sexually 'out of place' characters can be used to contrast with, or even subvert, dominant ideologies (Boyd-Bowman, 1982,

p.56). These positive readings are supported by comments made by Jeremy Lloyd, who defends the Mr Humphries character by pointing out that most people responded warmly to him. "I think 99 per cent of the audience would have loved having Mr Humphries round for dinner, because he was most entertaining, charming and amusing. He was always a friendly, caring sort of character, and I can't see why anyone should have been offended" (Webber, 1998, p.15).

Medhurst and Tuck acknowledge the power of such representations of homosexuality to threaten prevailing sexual ideology. But they point out the problems in such a reading. Placing sitcom within a tradition of communal working class entertainment such as music hall, they identify homosexual characters as images of gay men (rarely women) created by straight writers. In a genre already highly prone to stereotypical representation, these characters are shown to be deviants at whom the rest of normal society can laugh (Medhurst and Tuck, 1982, p.51).

There is no evidence that the Mr Humphries character was written with the conscious intention of either celebrating or condemning homosexuality. Rather it appears that as far as Croft and Lloyd were concerned the flamboyant menswear assistant was merely the latest in a long line of such characters to be found in this comedic tradition. References within the text suggest Croft and Lloyd do intend us to find Mr Humphries' character and behaviour 'out of place' but I would argue we are also intended to find his 'abnormality' comical rather than inspirational – he is ridiculous rather than subversive. Despite the fact that in a 1977 interview with the *Radio Times* Croft was almost pathologically frightened that if the photographer shot him too close to Lloyd people might think were a gay couple (Kington, 1977) and casual references to Mr Humphries as 'the poof', there's no real evidence either Croft or Lloyd is particularly homophobic. They make it clear their main aim is to get laughs and if it takes a screaming poof to do it, then so be it.

Croft confirms that his writing is not polemical; "I am not changing attitudes, just reporting them" (Lewin, 1993), and he believes any minority group is fair game for a laugh: "It's patronising to protect people from being joked about" (Hanlon, 1998). As far as the rather camp characterisation of Mr Humphries is concerned, there's no indication that either Croft and Lloyd or the BBC were particularly worried about any

gay backlash. Nevertheless, they avoided a direct confrontation on the issue by remaining coy about the character's sexuality. John Inman did not deny Mr Humphries was gay, but did not confirm it either: "How do they know Mr Humphries is a homosexual?," he asked the *Daily Express*. "He's a bit camp and fey. He's good to his mother and makes a wonderful Yorkshire pudding. But it's never ever been stated as to what sex he is" (Wigg, 1977). Lloyd also argued that Mr Humphries was intended to be a 'mummy's boy' rather than a gay man. Croft seemed uncertain – he denied the character was intended to be gay, agreeing with Lloyd that he is a 'mummy's boy', but earlier in the same interview he specifically referred to him as 'the poof' (Webber, 1998, p 15). The majority of critics seemed to accept Mr Humphries as a cartoon-like character typical of this type of humour and Lloyd argued that "you can't please everybody, and I'd rather satisfy most of the audience, as we did, than the minority" (Webber, 1998, p.15). Director Bob Spiers says he was not even aware of the criticisms and would have ignored them if he had been:

"I don't think we were doing any damage at all. It was going back to end-of-the-pier stuff, English comic tradition. Those sorts of characters had been around for a very long time, and it would be wrong to wipe them out. You have to be very careful about where you land those sort of jokes, and you just have to be responsible. I wouldn't say that we were irresponsible." (Rigelsford *et. al.*, 1995, p.127).

Of course, the intentions of the writers and the BBC often differ from the way the text is used by the audience. When *Are You Being Served?* first appeared this portrayal of homosexuality went unremarked by most, while many in the gay community saw it as entirely negative. Now, almost 30 years on, the modern love of kitsch and the greater acceptance of camp as a cultural force have dulled some of the negativity, and the critic Jonathan Margolis has argued the stereotypes are so overplayed and extreme they "merit ironic status" (Margolis, 1997). Certainly, it was unusual for a gay man to be allowed onto prime-time BBC1 television screens in the early 1970s without something terrible happening to him and doubtless he provided some young gay men with a sort of role model and forced people to admit that homosexuality existed. A US commentator remarks how popular the series was in 1990s San Francisco because Mr Humphries is the only time American audiences have been allowed to see a character

who is “campy and unapologetic at the same time and who’s accepted by everyone around him” (*Comedy Review*, 1996). Inman said he received letters from young gay men saying “thank you, you were my only yardstick” (*Laughter in the House*, ep. 2). But there is a great deal of difference between how the text operates on audiences now and how it operated then, the meanings to be inferred by the characters’ portrayals, the judgements reached by viewers and the subsequent effect on the writers.

Mr Humphries is fussy and neat, but occasionally given to dressing up in bizarre outfits made of leather or feathers – hinting that behind closed doors he may be a bit of a raver. He is easy-going and funny and appears well-liked by the other characters. Characters like him were a staple of the comic tradition within which Croft and Lloyd were working. *Round the Horne* on BBC radio had made much use of similar characters a few years earlier with its ‘Julian and Sandy’ sketches, although that show was given a radical edge by the writers’ use of Polare, a secret language used before the decriminalisation of homosexuality by ‘theatricals’ and gay people generally that enabled them to talk about their sexuality without being arrested. The type of characters typically played by Charles Hawtrey in *Carry On* films and the traditional music hall limp-wristed character were also similar to Mr Humphries and, like him, their homosexuality was implied rather than explicit; a source of fun for us rather than a source of identity for them.

Mr Humphries is stereotypical. He speaks in a high voice and makes constant innuendoes about his desire for sex, but on the rare occasions gay sex becomes a real possibility he retreats. He is friendly and funny and his undemanding, pleasant personality removes any perceived threat posed by his sexual orientation. We can laugh at Mr Humphries’ campiness without being forced to acknowledge the existence of actual gay sex and all that implies. We are not presented with an alternative lifestyle – merely a set of abnormal verbal and physical tics. An examination of the text shows that if Mr Humphries does have gay desires - although this is never made clear - he does not act upon them. His talk is peppered with innuendo about gay practices, and the other characters often make sly references to his dubious sexuality. So in ‘Coffee Morning’ (1975) when the union rep Mr Nash says staff members “want to be free and unrestricted in the cloak room” Mr Humphries pipes up “I’ll second that.” In the same episode, Mr Lucas makes a comment about Mr Humphries’

fondness for measuring inside legs while in 'Mrs Slocombe Expects'(1977), when asked to dress up as a customer, Mr Humphries chooses leather biker's gear. "Just walk around and look normal," Capt Peacock demands. "Do I get extra for character work?" Mr Humphries replies. However, in the same episode, Mr Humphries gets an unexpected chance actually to have a gay sexual encounter when a male customer makes a pass at him. But the idea appears to terrify him and he backs away.

Although homosexuality became legal in 1967, many people still considered it deviant behaviour and it would be some time before explicitly and openly gay characters were portrayed in comedy. Homosexuality had been illegal for much of Croft's writing career up to this point, so it was established in his mind as a taboo subject. Croft said he always avoided making homosexuality explicit. Instead Mr Humphries was a 'pansy' of the type he believed typically worked in menswear departments: "There was a time when nobody was accused openly of being a homosexual, it was illegal. I'm not clear if it became legal during *Are You Being Served?* or before" (Croft, 2002).

Deviants and sexual transgressors are often dealt with in liberal societies by placing them outside the norm and diffusing their threat by allowing them a certain amount of freedom but then subverting that power by laughing at them. Barthes theory of inoculation states that a certain amount of subversion is tolerated in order to neutralise its threat (Barthes, 1973, p. 150). The possibility of reading *Are You Being Served?* in this way is reinforced by the fact that the BBC openly admitted that comedy is often a useful way for liberal programme makers to tackle and neutralise 'extreme' views:

"The raucous anger, deep bitterness and unapologetically extreme attitudes abroad in the community are sometimes transmuted by programme-makers into more easily handled stereotypes – the racial bigot pops up as Alf Garnett and gets his come-uppance in the last scene, the homosexual becomes a limp-wristed buffoon in *Are You Being Served?*; sitcoms take the sting out of feminism or working-class anger ... It is a tenet of liberalism that the most effective way to neutralise extreme social attitudes is to blow them away in gusts of mocking laughter" (Morris, 1987, p21-22).

As Dyer points out, gay people celebrating camp is one thing, but straight people using camp to get a laugh quite another. Similarly, the stereotypical female characters are there to milk laughs because, according to Croft, “sexism is funny. It’s tongue-in-cheek and harmless” (Morgan, 1997). With Mr Humphries, Croft and Lloyd were able to show an extremely camp character and poke fun at gay sexuality without actually acknowledging the existence of gay sex. The BBC was aware that “men are particularly threatened by the serious portrayal of homosexual relationships on the television screen, although they are rarely offended by the limp-wristed parodies of camp males to be found in some comedies” (Morris, 1987, p.5). Consequently comedies tended to veer away from realistic portrayals of gay men’s lives. This was inevitable in the 1960s, when homosexuality was still illegal. But by the 1970s, the sexual politics and changing social mores made this style of humour much more problematic. The text makes it clear that although Mr Humphries is a warm and likeable character, his sexuality is something we should laugh at, not identify with. Behind this laughter is a fear of gay sex so great even Mr Humphries himself does not acknowledge his own gay desires.

However, it is not just Mr Humphries who is rendered sexually impotent. None of the characters ever actually has sex. This was a deliberate intention on the part of the programme makers. According to director John Kilby “no one does anything, they’re all impotent in a sense. You can have a snigger but it’s timeless humour, no one gets hurt” (Webber, 1998, p.36). Frank Thornton, who played Captain Peacock, also believes the impotence of the characters is vital to the show’s comic potential and popularity: “Traditional British farce is about sexual frustration and failure to seduce. If characters hop into bed with one another all the time you lose the humour” (Hanlon, 1998).

Sue Boyd-Bowman believes that setting these David Croft shows in the past, or in a present so old fashioned it may as well have been the past, enabled audiences to laugh at stereotypes without guilt (Boyd Bowman, 1982, pp.59-60). But I would argue 1970s audiences would have laughed at the stereotypes even if the show had been set in the future. Laughing at camp gay people and battleaxes was not seen as socially unacceptable at that time. It is unacceptable now, but the temporal distance enables modern audiences to feel free to enjoy the show. Croft prides himself on knowing

how to tread the line between good and bad taste and said he and Lloyd “went as far as we possibly could without over-stepping the mark” (Morgan, 1997). He identified the fears and tensions underneath the newly sexually-liberated society and defused them by placing them within an old-fashioned world of clear-cut morality. The audiences could be titillated, but not threatened, by the characters’ sexuality. Croft’s success was such that the BBC subsequently put aside fears that his shows were too crude and left him alone to present his safe version of a fast-changing world.

Conclusion

David Croft and Jeremy Lloyd’s entertainment background, their belief that comedy should not be intellectual and their love of ‘traditional’ British humour all fed into *Are You Being Served?* Meanwhile the relatively laissez-faire approach to programme making by the BBC Light Entertainment Department at this time, a certain amount of luck during the commissioning process and Bill Cotton’s ongoing faith in Croft’s work helped get the show made. Croft’s ability to choose cast members skilled at this style of comedy and comfortable with their characters also helped in the show’s success. Overt censorship in the Light Entertainment Department was rare, and the fact that he was his own producer gave Croft a great deal of freedom to pursue his own particular comic vision.

After the show was made, any initial fears that the BBC may have had about the crude nature of the comedy evaporated when it became obvious that the writers had judged public taste of the time perfectly. Largely positive press and audience reaction gave the BBC little reason to clamp down on the risqué aspects such as constant references to Mrs Slocombe’s pussy. The BBC naturally tended towards more middle-brow, literary forms of comedy writing, but it needed hit sitcoms and with *Are You Being Served?* it got one. *Are You Being Served?* was seen as harmless seaside humour by most critics and audience members. The show included a homosexual and references to sex, but was written in a way that people did not appear find offensive and which kept these elements firmly under control. Furthermore, because the show could be intellectualised as part of a long-standing British comedy ‘tradition’, more politically progressive members of the audience would also be unlikely to take offence. Some

gay men may not have liked it, but they could be dismissed as an extreme minority. Bill Cotton believed in allowing writers to push the boundaries of taste to see what the public would tolerate, and with *Are You Being Served?* he found the public perfectly prepared to tolerate sexual innuendo. In this way they could be titillated by the sexuality of the characters but could watch with their children safe in the knowledge that this sexuality would not be embarrassingly blatant.

Much of the humour of innuendo is generated by the knowledge that we are being invited to participate in something 'naughty' and this becomes less relevant in a world where sex is openly discussed. Thus the Grace Brothers store in *Are You Being Served?* exists in a time warp – an old fashioned world in which innuendo is still necessary. Croft almost dares us to project our modern cynicism onto its 'innocence' and allow ourselves to hear the 'smutty' meaning in an innuendo – if we think it is obscene it is our fault, not his.

Thus their preferred style of comedy writing enabled Croft and Lloyd to divorce their characters from the real world in terms of sexual behaviour. We are given two-dimensional people living within an artificially-structured world. In this way the characters in *Are You Being Served?* remain safe in terms of their sexuality – there is no danger of their feelings or behaviour disrupting the situation or their relationship with each other, thus helping maintain the mood of safety and stability Croft is so good at creating. In *Are You Being Served?* Mrs Slocombe is a battleaxe and Miss Brahms must remain a virgin if she is to avoid becoming a tart, and no emotional vulnerability or complexity, moral questioning or feminist demands are going to smash that cosy certainty. No matter how complicated life may really have been as the women's movement gained strength through the 1970s, in Croft's world there is no real threat to the established moral order. Miss Brahms' and Mr Lucas' libidinous, sexy demeanours are exciting and attractive to the viewer, but we do not have to come to terms with the thought of them actually having sex. Mr Lucas is always turned down and Miss Brahms, who is sexy (good), but not a tart (bad), always says no. Sexuality is on display, but by placing sexual stereotypes in a non-sexual situation, it is repressed.

In this way, the show became a refuge against new ideas, such as feminism, which many people found frightening. In Croft's opinion he provides good, old fashioned, harmless family entertainment and it is this non-threatening, non-confrontational, naughty-but-still-suitable-for-children aspect to which most audiences, happy to hark back to a more sexually 'innocent' age, responded. With *Are You Being Served?* Croft allowed viewers to briefly live in an old-fashioned world in which the characters follow conventional moral rules and behave in a predictable way. He dealt with changing social mores by ignoring the changes, and enabled his audiences to do the same.

CHAPTER FOUR

Esmonde, Larbey and The Good Life

The Good Life was, and remains, one of the BBC's best-loved sitcoms and appears to have the ability to engender deep-rooted feelings of warmth and calm (for example, see *Britain's Best Sitcom*, "The Good Life"). Its theme of a middle-class professional man dropping out of suburban society seems unlikely to be of interest in a study concerned with issues surrounding sexuality, but the show is an intriguing mix of a radical theme, a warm, gentle writing style, vivid characters and strong undercurrents of sexual frustration and desire. In this chapter I explore issues surrounding *The Good Life*'s authorship and creation. Did the writers' own personal style and background dictate what appeared in the text, or was their work influenced by television executives in need of a family-friendly peak-time sitcom hit? Focusing largely on dialogue, an examination of the text will reveal discourses on sexual desire and repression within monogamous, suburban marriages. A study of contemporary critical reaction, and of how the show was received by viewers, will also help discover why the show chimed so well with contemporary audiences. How important were the actors in creating their comic personas and why did Margo become such a powerful presence both within the text and beyond it?

The Writers

Esmonde and Larbey came from a similar south London background and attended the same grammar school. Esmonde's father was a businessman and Larbey's worked as a carpenter in the theatre. Both had a spell in the forces before working in mundane office jobs. The pair started writing together in their spare time and wrote gags for radio before deciding to try and make comedy a full time career. They had their first big television sitcom hit with *Please Sir!* (1968-72) and also scored a big hit for ITV with the flat-share comedy *Man About The House* (1973-76). *The Good Life* (1975-78) was their next big success. They went on to write a string of sitcoms throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the most successful of which were *Ever Decreasing Circles*

(1984-89), another examination of suburban life starring Richard Briers, albeit much more savage, and *Brush Strokes* (1986-91). Larbey wrote *A Fine Romance* (1981-84) on his own for ITV. Both Esmonde and Larbey have lived in the Surrey area for much of their lives, and many of their shows are set in the Home Counties, although Esmonde has since retired to Spain.

Their shows share similar characteristics. *Brush Strokes*, *Man About the House* and *The Other One* (1977-79) feature men who attempt, erroneously we are led to believe, to escape domesticity, while all of their output suggests that people, no matter how dire their circumstances, can be 'saved' by someone who understands what is important in life. This saviour can be, although is not usually, a lover. In *Don't Rock The Boat* (1982) the protagonist is saved by his young new wife, in *Mulberry* (1990) a manservant saves a crotchety old spinster and in *Double First* (1988) a former high-flyer who has fallen on hard times is rescued by two sisters. Martin, the protagonist of *Ever Decreasing Circles*, is, like *The Good Life's* Margo Leadbetter, a victim of his own obsession with trivialities and status but, like her, is rescued by a loving partner and a down-to-earth neighbour who pricks his pomposity.

After their initial success at ITV the pair were approached by James Gilbert, the BBC's head of comedy, who asked if they would be interested in working for the corporation. He also enquired whether they would consider writing a vehicle for the actor Richard Briers. The pair came up with the idea for *The Good Life* after a conversation about the horrors of reaching 40 and realising life has not fulfilled its original promise. They were keen to write for Briers because he was about the same age as them:

"John and I simply got to talk about being 40 and is it one of those 'Oh God' ages, as in 'Oh God, the world's passed me by and nothing's happening... So that was the actual kick off for the idea. What would a man do on his fortieth birthday if he has that sort of doomy feeling."
(Larbey, 2002).

The theme of self-sufficiency was popular at the time and Esmonde and Larbey decided to use this idea, but twist it by setting it in suburbia rather than in the

countryside. The show's characters and setting reflected the lives of the writers. Like them, the characters were about 40 years old and lived a comfortable married life in Surrey. Esmonde and Larbey, like Tom Good, had felt a need to break out of their office-bound existence and so began sending in ideas for radio comedy sketches; "We remembered the feeling of wanting to break out which is what we were trying to do. We were trying a little revolution of our own saying 'wouldn't it be wonderful, not to be self-sufficient, but just to be independent'" (Larbey, 2002). To this extent the situation - a break for freedom - was the first aspect of the show to be put in place (sff NET, online). The characters followed, although they ultimately became so complex and three dimensional that, as with Esmonde and Larbey's other shows, *The Good Life* became a hymn to the redemptive power of love and friendship, with self-sufficiency providing an interesting hook rather than the driving force.

The Actors

Experienced comedy actor Richard Briers, for whom the show was written, had been popular with audiences in Richard Waring's *Marriage Lines* (1963-66) but was approaching 40. James Gilbert was looking for a role that would enable him to drop his youthful, "silly ass" image and start playing middle-aged men (McGill, 1975).

Briers, was the only well-known television actor amongst the cast because of his starring role in *Marriage Lines*. Penelope Keith (Margo), Felicity Kendal (Barbara) and Paul Eddington (Jerry) were all experienced stage actors but were new to television. Gilbert believed this was one of the strengths of the show: "That was part of the magic. You had three thumping good actors who weren't yet familiar to television viewers. A lot of people even thought we'd discovered them, that they were new to the profession!" (Webber, 2000, p.19). Larbey agrees that this was important because the audience could feel it was discovering new talent and gain pleasure from the show that way (Larbey, 2002). This newness also gave the writers a certain degree of freedom. Hobson has noted how audiences sometimes have difficulties accepting types of behaviour not normally associated with specific actors (Hobson, 1982, p.87), but, apart from Briers, the main actors in *The Good Life* were not known for previous roles. The choice of actors also reflected the Alan Ayckbourn-like style of the series.

Ayckbourn specialised in comic dissections of middle-class suburbia and his plays were very popular in the 1970s. The writers were not consciously influenced by the playwright (Larbey, 2002) but producer John Howard Davies had been to school with Ayckbourn, and, when he read Esmonde and Larbey's script, recognised similarities in style. Gilbert and Howard Davies were both theatre-goers and saw all four leads acting in Ayckbourn plays. The actors' familiarity with that type of material made them appear suitable for the roles.

Penelope Keith's role was initially very small; she only had one off-camera line in the first episode. But before long she had her own catchphrase (Thank you very much, Jerry!) She became closely associated in the public's mind with the role she played, and she and Eddington were perceived as being such a convincing couple the line between reality and fantasy began to blur. According to Paul Eddington's widow, members of the public would shout "where's Margo" at him while he walked down the street. She claims her husband enjoyed playing Jerry very much, although he felt the character's personality was nothing like his own (*Britain's best sitcom*, "The Good Life"). Claims by the cast that they got on well appear to have been true. All four main cast members have made this comment, at the time and subsequently.

According to Eddington, the four became good friends, thus helping the show's success: "Many people remarked on the comradely feelings we appeared to share" (Eddington, 1995, p.128). The writers were also aware that the quality of the acting enabled their vision to be more successfully realised. Larbey said it was soon obvious they had stumbled upon another three potential comedy leads in Eddington, Keith and Kendall (Larbey, 2002). BBC executives, meanwhile, were relieved that the changing nature of the show from a star vehicle to an ensemble piece had not caused tensions, and put this down to the skill of John Howard Davies as producer. They were also aware of how beneficial it was for the BBC to have the use of such well-regarded actors.

The degree of input by the cast into the content of the show is unclear as individual participants have different recollections of what happened. The key issue seems to be the degree to which the original scripts were modified during production. Cameraman Ken Willicombe recalled that "there didn't seem to be a rigid script structure, and (actors) were able to feed their views into the whole production" (Webber, 2000,

p31). Paul Eddington claimed this included the actors being allowed to have their say on what dialogue they felt would be suitable for their characters. Eddington also claimed the writers agreed to his request that he not be a smoker. But Esmonde and Larbey maintain their scripts were altered “surprisingly little”, with most changes made at the read-through stage because of obvious problems. The writers say the short amount of time in which the show could be made meant that radical changes were not a good idea (sff NET, online). Larbey is adamant that Eddington misremembered what happened, and asserts that neither the actors nor producer John Howard Davies changed the scripts, which were filmed pretty much as they were written:

“The British style basically is to trust the writer. If we had an idea that (Howard Davies) felt uncomfortable about he would say so, but the actual words themselves got changed very little indeed... If the actors actually trust the writers they don’t fiddle around with the words” (Larbey, 2002).

But if they didn’t change the actual words in the script, the actors’ skill and growing knowledge of their characters doubtless helped make the characterisations rounded and realistic. Penelope Keith certainly helped define Margo’s character, because she helped to choose the clothes that became a defining expression of Margo’s personality. Briers claimed that the actors did suggest some ideas to the writers, including a row between Tom and Barbara, and a scene where the four are all drunk. Esmonde and Larbey say they did not tailor their material specifically for the cast, but expected them to have the talent to make the most of the words they were given. But both writers admit it was inevitable that some of the actors’ mannerisms and style would rub off onto the writing, while Larbey agrees that if actors come up with reasonable ideas, any reasonable writer would listen to them (Larbey, 2002).

“If something runs for a few series, you do inevitably pick something up from the actors. You pick up the way that they say certain things, the way that they wave their hands or don’t wave their hands and you sort of allow for that, but I think to begin with you just try and write solid characters and then rely on the actors’ talent” (sff NET, online).

The Production Process

After a few initial pages of the first script were completed, James Gilbert sent them to Richard Briers, who liked the idea. Gilbert subsequently commissioned two scripts and obtained permission from the channel controller Brian Cowgill to make a series, bypassing the Offers Meetings system completely: "I had a good relationship with the controllers of BBC1 and BBC2, so, if there was something I was really keen on, I'd jump in the lift and go and see them. If they had the money and the studios they would agree" (Webber, 2000, p14). He was also aware that he needed to strike while the iron was hot if he was to avoid the self-sufficiency subject matter becoming dated. At the time self-sufficiency, sparked by the oil crisis and subsequent economic downturn, was becoming fashionable, with a steady stream of scripts on the subject arriving on Gilbert's desk "We had to do it very quickly, it's suddenly the topical subject," he said just before the transmission of the first series (Bakewell, 1975).

Gilbert assigned John Howard Davies as producer. By 1975, Howard Davies' production credits included *Steptoe and Son* (1962-74), *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 1979), *The Goodies* (1970-82) and *Monty Python* (1969-74). One of the reasons Howard Davies was chosen was his ability to encourage team work; he insisted that Esmonde and Larbey were always included in the production process. Howard Davies himself claimed he was attracted to working on the show by its unusual, topical theme and the chance to work with Briers (Webber, 2000, p.17).

There would be an initial read-through, rehearsal and blocking, at which the writers would be present. They would answer any questions and make any necessary changes, but they would not attend further rehearsals. This first rehearsal would be followed by more rehearsals, then a rehearsal in front of a camera and finally recording in front of a live studio audience. The entire rehearsal and recording process took five days. Laughter was not dubbed (Morley, 1975). The show also included filmed segments, often recorded several weeks before the studio shots, which were played to the studio audience so that laughter could be recorded.

The Good Life is one of the shows often cited as typical of the BBC's output of 'cosy' sitcoms in the 1970s, and certainly it contains no bad language and nothing but the

mildest, and then only occasional, *double entendre*. There is no evidence that the BBC put pressure on Esmonde and Larbey to write it this manner and Larbey argued that the show was a typical example of his and Esmonde's writing style: "Gentle is a work often applied to our writing ... We never intended to write gentle comedies, it just became our style" (Webber, 2000, p.39). According to Eddington, the original scripts were "peppered with some racily fashionable four-letter words" and the actors, feeling the characters they were playing would never swear, spoke to the authors about it, who said it was "the first posh script they had written" and removed them without complaint (Eddington, 1995, p.128). This claim is vehemently denied by Larbey who says the show was always clean:

"We started off with our own style... and didn't realise until we got along the way that amongst other things it was what's called clean. And having realised it we actually decided to stick with it. We thought that if you can't get laughs without sticking in swear words there's not very much there in the first place" (Larbey, 2002).

It was never the pair's intention to attack or provoke the audience or accepted norms of behaviour and in this they were supported by Howard Davies, who said he was happy if audiences "enjoy a programme, have a good laugh and get some pleasure from it, be it escapism, whatever you like to call it" (Monteith, 1986). After the first rehearsal Esmonde and Larbey left Howard Davies, who also directed the show, to get on with it and trusted him not to distort their vision. Meanwhile people above Howard Davies in the hierarchy were also happy to leave the show alone. The only time the BBC became alarmed was when Tom said something which could be construed as alluding to Barbara's menstrual cycle. This was queried after transmission, not before (Larbey, 2002). Gilbert would sometimes visit the set, but made no attempt to change or censor the show (Larbey, 2002).

After the first episode was transmitted on April 4 1975, BBC executives were fairly underwhelmed. The BBC1 controller Brian Cowgill said he was hoping it would have the same kind of appeal as *Last of the Summer Wine* (1973-), while Bill Cotton complained that it did not really become funny until the second half (BBCWAC TVWPR, 9/4/75). As the first series progressed, however, executives thought it was

“developing well” (BBCWAC WPR, 16/4/75), was “a programme of quality” (BBCWAC WPR, 23/4/75) and, by the end of the series, was “splendidly funny... Jimmy Gilbert said that the scriptwriters had the range to put themselves in the Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais class. MD Tel. hoped they would stick to this series for three years” (BBCWAC WPR, 14/5/75). The second series was universally praised by executives and by the end of it they hailed it as one of the “heavyweight successes of all time” (BBCWAC WPR, 25/5/77).

There were four series of the show, each containing seven episodes. Two were broadcast in 1975, a third in 1976 and a fourth in 1977, all on BBC1 in peak time. There were also two specials, one of which was a Royal Variety Performance. The decision to end the show was taken by the writers’, who felt they had run out of ideas about self-sufficiency (sff NET, online).

Critical and Audience Reaction

The advance publicity for *The Good Life* focused on its unusual subject matter and on Briers, who was the only big star. Critical response to the first show was largely, although not entirely, positive, with praise for the writing and acting. *The Daily Telegraph* commented that the writers had “mined a rich seam of domestic humour from the situation and in Tom and Barbara have created a warm, lively and essentially likeable couple” (May 17, 1975). *The Financial Times*, in an otherwise lukewarm review, said the idea was original and topical (April 16, 1975). *The Sunday Telegraph* praised Briers’ performance (April 27, 1975) and *The Morning Star* liked its warmth (April 20, 1975).

Audience research into the first episode showed a modest Reaction Index of 55. Although there was much praise, with some viewers remarking on the good script and acting and the unusual, thought-provoking theme, a majority of these surveyed were “reserving judgement, having been at best only mildly amused” (BBCWAC, R9/7/164, AR report 4/4/75). Within a couple of weeks, however, ratings had risen by two-and-a-half million to 8.5m and the R.I. rose to 64. By the end of the first series ratings had reached nine million. At this time it was not unheard of for successful

entertainment shows to pull in twice as many viewers, but it was not a bad figure for a new sitcom. BBC executives were over the moon, and the BBC1 controller Brian Cowgill's only gripe was the six-month wait for the next series (BBCWAC WPR, 2/4/75). Even without this positive feedback, the BBC's policy of allowing each sitcom one series in order to establish itself meant a second series was likely. Howard Davies said he knew instinctively that the BBC's patience would be rewarded: "You can sense when you're working on something good. You may not know how good, but I had faith in the show" (Webber, 2000 p.37).

The first series was repeated immediately before the second was screened. This proved a successful ploy and the 1975/76 Annual Review of BBC Audience Research Findings said *The Good Life* was "an interesting example of how a series can 'catch on'" (BBC, 1975/6, p.23). The end of the first series left viewers longing for more, and "when it did return it was with a much increased, but equally delighted, audience. People interviewed for audience research purposes described it as 'refreshing', 'true-to-life', 'hilarious', and were full of praise for the 'superb performances'" (BBC, 1975/6, p.22). Viewing figures for the second series rose from 9m and an R.I. of 67 to 15.5m and a very high R.I. of 78 (BBCWAC WPR, 27/10/76). The show also sold well abroad.

By the second series, reviewers were treating the show more as an ensemble piece. There were some fears the writers might be stretching the idea somewhat, but the strength of the acting and warmth of the show continued to garner praise. For one episode of this series, Esmonde and Larbey wrote a scene for Margo in which she gives a council official a hard time, declaring herself to be 'the silent majority'. This sparked the viewers' imaginations and reviewers started commenting on the strength and depth of this character. *The Telegraph* called her "majestic" (December 6, 1975), *The Morning Star* declared her to be "splendidly rounded" (December 20, 1975), and Clive James in *The Observer* said it was Margo and Jerry who made the series such a success. He described Margo as a "meticulously groomed, flint-profiled ballbreaker" (December 21, 1975).

The balance of the show steadily changed through time. The character of Margo became more important and the programme became less of a Richard Briers vehicle.

Bob Larbey denies this was intentional, claiming the show was always intended to be an ensemble piece, albeit with Briers as the lead (Larbey, 2002). But it was easy to get a laugh with Margo, Keith played her well and she seemed to strike a chord with audiences, who were apparently capable of deciding for themselves who the strongest and most interesting characters were. Research confirmed that the third series had maintained the show's popularity. The final episode, *The Last Posh Frock*, "had the most favourable reception so far. Though tinged with a touch of pathos, many of its audience said it was a fitting conclusion to what was, in their opinion, the best comedy series for years". This report recognised the growing role of the Leadbetters; "For some viewers the two neighbours were tending to overshadow the 'good lifers'" (BBC, 1976/77, p16).

By the fourth series in 1977, Margo had become something of a cult and inspired a full-page *Radio Times* review by Julian Mitchell. He remarked that the comedy of the show had not changed but the situation had because Margo was now such an important character. Instead of the Leadbetters being foils for the Goods, the situation had reversed, he believed (Mitchell, 1977). Mitchell's review gives some indication of the range of emotions Margo could engender. He rhapsodised about her moral certainty and her ability to stand up for what she believed was right, maintaining that, in an emergency, it would be Margo to whom one would turn. Mitchell also highlighted her matriarchal qualities, likening her to both Elizabeth the First and Queen Victoria, and compared this quality with the wishy-washy liberal, child-like Goods, playing on their pretend farm. The following week's edition of the *Radio Times* contained four letters, under the heading 'The Margo Cult', responding to this reading. Two of them argued that no right-minded British person would turn to Margo in a crisis because we prefer our leaders (bearing in mind these were pre-Margaret Thatcher days) to be less aggressive, especially as Margo's "vehement assertion of her way of life barely masks her insecurity." The third felt that Margo was impossible to admire because of her lack of humour, pretentiousness and "artificial values". The fourth just generally praised the programme (June 11, 1977).

Almost all successful sitcom writers in the 1970s were men, and it was extremely rare for them to create women with a strong sexual persona who were past 'dolly bird' age. Keith perfectly combined strength and vulnerability, and physically she was

perfect – tall and strong but also slender and attractive. Francis Gray gives complete credit to Keith for making Margo such a three-dimensional character, trapped in her own “prison of convention” while secretly longing to be free of it (Gray, 1994, p.100). The skill of the writers had a lot to do with it as well, but it is certainly true that in *The Good Life* Keith started to develop a character she would later deploy to great effect. Although *The Good Life* gained a large audience, presumably across different social groups, Margo scored a bulls-eye with middle England because of her robust defence of traditional values. To a nation frustrated by continuous political and industrial unrest, Margo’s condemnation of striking power workers as “neo Marxists” probably struck a chord. “That character arrived on television at exactly the right time and she was much admired amongst the shires and the hams,” believes John Howard Davies (*Britain’s Best Sitcom*, “The Good Life”). Britons enjoyed a character who knew what she believed, had no time for annoying little men holding the country to ransom, and had the strength to stand up for what she felt was right. The subsequent rise to power of Margaret Thatcher suggests that the country was ready for women like her to finally leave the confines of the home. Keith was so successful in the role, and in her subsequent performance as Audrey Forbes-Hamilton in *To the Manor Born* (1979-81), that she became the personification of this *Daily Mail*-reading, Tory-voting Mrs Thatcher-type character. As late as 1989 *The Daily Mail* itself remarked; “To the British public, Penelope Keith is the archetypal dyed-in-the-wool Conservative. Instinctively and emotionally. And they adore her for it” (May 10, 1989). The *frisson* of sexuality surrounding such a conservative character only added to the excitement.

Eventually *The Good Life* was being described by viewers in BBC research as “one of the most popular series of all time.” The writing was “sharp, witty and adult” and the acting “superlative” (BBC, 1977/78, p19). This final series achieved the highest viewing figures of the four, an average of 15.7m. Audience research suggested that the series maintained its popularity to the end. Not everyone was a fan, however. Just after the end of its run Auberon Waugh accused it of intrusive sentimentality and feeble jokes, although he had to admit it had been popular: “Still, if that’s what people like...” (Waugh, 1978). Margaret Drabble, however, recognised the show’s powerful allure because of its ability to “embody the fantasies and anxieties of so many of us” (Drabble, 1975). Certainly *The Good Life* engendered great affection among its audience. Eddington says the public was so grateful for a show they could enjoy with

their children, they sent in many letters and stopped cast members on the street and thanked them. This meant that on the one occasion a swear word (sod) was used there were numerous protests.

Viewers wrote, generally praising the show, to members of the cast and to the BBC, who passed the letters on to the show's writers. Larbey maintains these letters did not influence the way he and Esmonde wrote the show. Similarly he rejects any suggestion that press reaction had any effect; "My theory, and John's I think as well, has always been that you must write what you think is funny and must hope that other people find it funny. If they don't, bad luck" (Larbey, 2002).

Themes and Representations

The Good life has a straightforward narrative structure and a naturalistic approach to language and characterisation. In this it is diametrically opposed to the work of David Croft, which relies on absurd situations, stereotypical character types and innuendo-heavy dialogue. Instead Esmonde and Larbey draw on the drawing-room tradition in British comedy, which explores social interaction within and between the British middle and upper classes. Its light, polite tone could hint at absurdities or darker passions below the surface, as in the work of Alan Ayckbourn. Although a more socially and sexually confrontational tone of comedy which dealt directly with class and gender differences and which featured working class characters had become more fashionable in Britain from the late 1950s (examples from television include *Steptoe and Son* (1962-74), *The Likely Lads* (1965-66) and *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-75)), *The Good Life* is an example of how the drawing-room format could still appeal to mass audiences.

The subject of the series is the mid-life crisis of the central character, Tom Good. Tom designs plastic models for cereal boxes and makes enough of a living to keep himself and wife Barbara in middle-class suburban comfort in Surrey. But when he hits 40 he questions the validity of his life and decides to become self-sufficient by keeping animals and growing crops in the back garden of his Surbiton semi. Esmonde and Larbey disrupt the classic scenario in this type of suburban comedy by literally

bringing the farmyard into the drawing room, thus setting up an intriguing clash between middle-class sensibilities and the uncompromising aspects of nature. The characters are all solidly middle-class and have apparently had no previous experience of this type of life. But Tom and Barbara enjoy a loving, supportive marriage and, although she is sceptical, Barbara agrees to help Tom with his plans for self-sufficiency. Next door neighbours Jerry and Margo Leadbetter are dubious, however, and fear the Goods' lives will collapse in ruin, taking property prices down with them. Jerry is an executive at the firm where Tom used to work and epitomises the type of person Tom wants to leave behind. He is a cog in what Tom refers to as "the system" and lives the life one would expect of an executive, placing a great deal of importance on looking the part and pleasing his boss. But he is also funny and benign and watches the Goods' antics with mild amusement tinged with occasional concern or irritation. Margo does not go out to work but devotes herself to her home and being a good wife. She is extremely concerned with appearances and her neighbours' alternative lifestyle is a source of stress. Even so, the Leadbetters are also very fond of their friends and, despite their objections to their chosen way of life, support them whenever they can.

The difficulties of self-sufficiency in a suburban back garden may have been the original subject of *The Good Life*, but its themes are love, friendship, and the attractions of a life liberated from the oppression of material possessions and status. Two sexual relationships lie at the heart of the show, the marriages of Tom and Barbara Good and of Jerry and Margo Leadbetter. The former is a typical sitcom relationship: "the witty, self-opinionated male monologue-machine sounding off at the passive, supportive female" (Medhurst and Tuck, 1982, p. 48). Esmonde and Larbey claim they were always aware that the behaviour of Tom, who expects his wife to unquestioningly follow his vision and accept the resulting privations, may smack of chauvinism to some viewers. But Tom Good was a character with which the mostly-male television executives of the time had no problem and there is no evidence to suggest contemporary audiences or critics questioned Tom's behaviour. Esmonde and Larbey's comedies frequently featured a know-it-all male character, such as Robin (Richard O'Sullivan) in *Man About the House* and Jacko (Karl Howman) in *Brush Strokes*, but their tendency to show characters being redeemed by love meant that these men also had a vulnerable side. Tom's warm and likeable personality meant he remained a sympathetic character (Webber, 2000, p.15). He does not force Barbara

to go along with his plans, and it is likely he would have abandoned them if she had refused to take part. Furthermore, Barbara frequently acted as the 'conscience' in the relationship, keeping the pair on the path of self-sufficiency. She also appears liberated by the whole experience, and, despite the fact the plan was not her idea, feels she has escaped the narrowness of her former life. "This beats sitting under a hairdryer talking about the pill, I can tell you," she tells Tom while they build a piggery. Whatever Barbara may have secretly felt about her sudden loss of status, wealth and material possessions, it is made clear that she will always be there to support her husband.

However, although she provides the strength within the relationship, Barbara is very much in the supportive role. In this she fits Butsch's description of middle-class female sitcom characters as "sensible, mature, and responsible in their supportive roles as wives and mothers" (Butsch, 1992, p. 391). She is not, and never has been, the bread-winner and it is Tom who makes most of the decisions. Her love for Tom keeps her in the marriage, and outside it Barbara is powerless because of her lack of financial independence.

Feminist commentator Maggie Andrews has commented on the tendency to infantilise men in sitcoms and other forms of popular culture aimed at women, such as advertising (Andrews, 1998, pp.56-57). This tendency is discernable within *The Good Life*. Despite the fact he is 40, Tom is presented as an over-enthusiastic child playing with his latest toy; and both Barbara and Margo have a tendency to treat their husbands like children. Typical are scenes in 'The Day Peace Broke Out', in which Barbara catches Tom playing with a gun and smiles indulgently, and 'Say Little Hen' in which Jerry comes up with an idea to get Tom his job back. Margo pats him on the head and says "well done". Margo also makes it clear to Tom she considers him a child who is unable to grasp the realities of life. "I am not in the mood for your smutty schoolboy humour," she tells him, going on to ask when he will realise he is "living in Surbiton, not Zaire." In this way, female characters are able to seize some power, despite their 'supportive' role within the marriage and lack of financial independence. This trend may also help to explain the popularity of *The Good Life* among some women. Male infantilism can be a source of psychological pleasure for some women viewers, because it makes women appear adult and competent in contrast. Possibly

the authors were, at some level, colluding with this. Certainly Bob Larbey was aware that, despite her apparent strength, Margo had little power. Bossing Jerry around and making him carry out trivial tasks for her is one way for Margo to grab back some control. As a result she comes across as a stronger, if somewhat trivial and deluded, character, thus allowing the writers to explore her personality in a more effective way.

Margo and her husband Jerry are quite unlike Tom and Barbara in terms of personality and ambitions and they interact with each other in a different manner. Tom and Barbara resemble two scruffy children playing in the mud; Tom has a mop of unruly hair and a cheeky grin and Barbara a large-eyed, vulnerable look like a baby chipmunk. Jerry and Margo, in contrast, are always smart, clean and well-dressed and seem very adult in comparison to the Goods. In some respects a stereotypical snob and battleaxe, Margo can quite suddenly show levels of vulnerability and self-awareness which give the character more depth, such as her admission that she feels inadequate because she lacks a sense of humour; life is a joke which she has not been let in on. She is also intriguing sexually. Battleaxe figures in sitcoms tend to be physically unattractive, which makes it easier for male characters, threatened by their strength, to belittle them. But Margo, although not conventionally pretty, is considered attractive by some men. As we have seen, she sparked something of a cult and many commentators remarked on her powerful sexual magnetism. In this she differs from Barbara who is also considered attractive, but who has a much more docile, conventional sex appeal. With Margo the spark comes from her feistiness and strength, which is externally represented by her striking looks.

When the strength of Keith's acting and her suitability for the role became apparent it was clear to Esmonde and Larbey that they had a comic goldmine in Margo. They were aware that the character just walking in to a room could engender a laugh, even before she opened her mouth. They resisted the temptation to turn her into a monster, believing this would make her two-dimensional (Larbey, 2002). Instead they quite intentionally made Margo an intriguing blend of strength and vulnerability and dismiss readings of her as a battleaxe as incorrect. There is no evidence that Esmonde and Larbey set out to create a sexually intriguing character when they dreamt up Margo. However, the strength of the character quickly outgrew her origins and it seems likely that this was partly as a result of some men's fascination with

domineering women and partly because of the casting of Penelope Keith, who played the character well. Sexually, individual men respond to her in different ways and some do not find her attractive at all. It seems likely that her somewhat aggressive approach to life, with the occasional tantalising glimpse of vulnerability, is what many British men find intriguing. Margo's capability and her tendency to treat everyone else like an errant child also gave her a matriarchal, or nanny-like, air, which some men find sexually exciting.

In fiction, strong but frustrated women are often portrayed as being obsessed with trivialities, such as status or possessions, and Margo's position within Surbiton society is seen as unnecessarily important to her. The writers suggest that Margo's behaviour is also the result of a well-hidden lack of self-confidence caused by her knowledge that she has no sense of humour and "a childhood in which she was constantly the butt of other kids' fun" (Webber, 2000, p.82). Keith herself was also aware that her character's laughs came not from the fact that she said anything particularly funny, but because of her whole manner: "I don't have laugh lines. Margo gets the laughs because her snobbery, her haughtiness, make her so vulnerable – she is the butt of other people's jokes" (Genower, 1977). Nevertheless, there is something magnificent about Margo's uncompromising, truthful manner; "At least when you're in opposition you're open about it," says Barbara after another haranguing. Although the authors admit that Margo is probably rather 'orthodox' in bed (Larbey, 2002), there is no indication her marriage to Jerry is sexually unfulfilled. It seems more likely her fixations are the result of a lack of real respect or status within the world because of her position as wife. Thus Margo can shout at the workmen because they are in the one domain in which she has any power – her home: "If one of the tradespeople gave her a bit of lip, she'd come down on them like Margaret Thatcher on a junior minister" comments John Howard Davies (*Britain's Best Sitcom*, "The Good Life"). Her airs and graces are a desire to achieve the status she believes will win her security and respect. Margo, who strongly disapproves of Tom's behaviour, believes he is bullying Barbara, even calling her 'pathetic' at one point ("Say Little Hen"), while in her own marriage, she suggests, she holds the whip hand. But both women, while able to win the occasional point against their husband, rely on them emotionally and financially.

Jerry tolerates his wife's foibles because he is not threatened by them - he is the one bringing in the money and he knows it. In many ways Jerry is an everyman figure with which many married male members of the audience probably felt they could identify – henpecked and rather bored, but relatively happy with his lot and careful not to jeopardise it. He lacks Tom's courage and is prepared to swallow a great deal of pride to keep in his boss's good books. But his laid-back personality, pragmatism and desire for a quiet existence means his life, if not necessarily exciting or particularly rewarding, is comfortable and peaceful. Jerry also loves Margo and knows he needs her to help him maintain the lifestyle of a successful executive. However annoying she may be at times, he has learned to let some of her excesses wash over him. In the first season's episode 'Say Little Hen' he tells Tom he's "just tolerant. I'm also a bit deaf in the ear I use for Margo". He is prepared to indulge her need for order and material wealth, but when she is not there takes the opportunity to put his feet on the sofa and eat takeaway curry. As the show moved on from its first season, Jerry's feelings are shown as being somewhat deeper. In the third season show 'The Wind-Break War' he tells Barbara that he does love Margo, and he will leap to her defence when he feels she is under attack. When Tom implies Margo may have stolen some leeks from him in the second season's episode 'The Day Peace Broke Out', Jerry is quick to take her side.

Andrews claims that male writers frequently undermine their female characters by portraying them as leeches, mindlessly spending their husband's hard-earned money (Andrews, 1998, pp. 57-58). There is a certain element of that in Margo and Jerry's relationship, but Margo is clearly providing the emotional stability and support her husband needs – emphasising the writers' message that marriage is the ideal state because it is symbiotic and mutually fulfilling. It is fairly clear that Jerry appreciates Margo's ability to maintain the perfect house and provide the flawless entertaining he requires. The writers deliberately made her a good executive's wife and Larbey thinks of the couple as having an unspoken pact about which role each would play in the relationship (Larbey, 2002). In 'Say Little Hen' she manages to whip up a French meal for Jerry's boss with just a couple of hours' notice; "I'll manage. A woman always does". Meanwhile Barbara's whole existence seems to revolve around supporting Tom and making their new lifestyle work.

Neither couple has children. The reasons for this were largely practical. Employing children as actors would have made the production more difficult and they have a tendency to grow up very quickly. The presence of children would also have altered the dynamic of the show. The ethics of forcing a self-sufficient lifestyle on children would have been problematic and the relationship between Barbara and Tom in which she panders to his child-like enthusiasms more difficult to justify and sustain, as would Margo's flawless home and appearance and obsession with trivialities.

Although *The Good Life* is a gentle, family show free from bad language and explicit sexual content, ironically there is a strong undercurrent of sex running through the entire show that is so understated it goes virtually unnoticed. When Barbara offers to pay the window cleaner "in kind", his assumption that she must be offering him sex is treated as a lighthearted joke, in the same way as a David Croft innuendo is regarded as perfectly acceptable family fare. This sexual undercurrent springs partly from the sexual relationships between, and sexual desirability of, the characters and partly from a situation in which the earthy charms of the farmyard are suddenly transposed to the heart of neat and tidy suburbia. The back-to-the-land theme of the show sets up interesting contrasts that are echoed sexually, although there is no evidence this was intentional on the part of the writers. A comfortable life in suburbia was a typical middle-class aspiration at this time, and it tended to be characterised by clean and neat homes and fairly isolated family units headed by a man who goes to an office to earn money to keep his wife, who tends the home and children. Common ways in which sitcoms derive their humour include putting characters in inappropriate settings and comic disruptions of the norm. Esmonde and Larbey's theme of self sufficiency in a Surbiton back garden exploited these. The writers shied away from disrupting the marital relationships, but instead presented viewers with a range of oppositions which forced them to reflect upon the differences between the Leadbetters and the Goods. Thus the Goods are associated with mud and dirt, and pictured in clothes and a home which are tatty and untidy. Their lifestyle brings to mind images of animals instinctively mating and giving birth and the repetitive cycle of nature which is basic to life – all vital, natural, sexual things. Across the garden fence are Margo and Jerry, whom we associate with the essence of suburbia. Whereas the Goods are dealing with life and death, the Leadbetters are concerned with material matters such as money, status and possessions. Their home is clean, they are fastidious about their personal

appearance and they have nature thoroughly under control in their orderly, neat garden.

Esmonde and Larbey's recurrent themes of love and friendship providing redemption underlie both the subject matter of self-sufficiency and the subtle portraits of married life and sexual politics. This association of the aptly-named Goods with vital, life-affirming forces encourages us to see them as providing redemption for their neighbours, who are associated with repression and false values such as materialism. For example, in 'The Happy Event' Tom urges Margo to watch the birth of the piglets because "it's beautiful" but Margo says that that sort of thing makes her faint. In almost every episode there is some aspect of Tom and Barbara's life which Margo finds repulsive, and it is usually something to do with dirt or sex, suggesting her sexual side is repressed. She finds goats, which are very symbolic creatures associated with dark demonic forces, hairy and smelly, and in 'Backs to the Wall' she completely covers herself in bright yellow plastic before gingerly helping to pick some beans. Because of these oppositions, plus the fact that Tom and Barbara are often seen hopping off to bed while Margo and Jerry restrict themselves to a chaste peck on the cheek, it is difficult not to associate the Goods with fecundity and sex and the Leadbetters with repression and sterility. There are undercurrents in Margo's behaviour, however, which suggest a repressed desire actually to indulge in Tom and Barbara's lifestyle. She responds to Tom's occasional flirting, and when Tom shouts at her in 'The Happy Event' in the third season, she actually seems to like it and meekly does what he says. She also shows her maternal side when feeding the piglet. In the same episode she seems uncharacteristically excited when Barbara gets a horse, and is angry when Tom says they cannot afford to keep it. Horses are symbolic of sexuality and freedom, and the close bond between young women and horses can represent of an awakening of sexual desire. Jerry, meanwhile, who is in danger of becoming closed and cynical, is forced by his love of the Goods to accept their lifestyle – even help them with it. By doing so he remains in touch with real, rather than false, values.

Although marriage is portrayed in a positive light in *The Good Life*, sexual desire is not always contained within the married relationships. Although Tom is in love with, and sexually desirous of, his wife, it is not unknown for him to flirt with other

women. Indeed, there is palpable sexual tension between Tom and Margo and Jerry and Barbara, echoing urban myths of wife-swapping parties in suburbia. Larbey denies any suggestion of wife-swapping, but Felicity Kendall believes it to “definitely” be a hidden theme: “We shared each other” (*Friday Night with Jonathan Ross*, 2003). An examination of the text suggests this tension is there, and it becomes more obvious as the show progresses. The frustrations of long-term monogamy are felt most clearly in season three’s ‘The Wind-Break War’ in which all four characters get drunk on home-made wine. Jerry asks Barbara not to push her hair back from her face because “it brings out the beast in me... I’ve always had a yen for you, you know that.” Meanwhile Tom is telling Margo she has a sexy neck and the pair come very close to kissing, before being disturbed by the sound of Barbara’s laughter in the kitchen. Although everybody remains rigorously faithful to his or her partner and the couples enjoy happy marriages, the untapped possibilities are hinted at in references to wife-swapping. In ‘The Happy Event’ Margo, who is helping with a night-time piglet delivery, is worried the neighbours will see her and Jerry coming out the Goods’ home in their night clothes and assume the worst. Wife swapping, she declares, “hasn’t reached Surbiton yet, but it’s already got as far as Epsom”. In ‘The Wind-Break War’, Jerry even hints he might like to try it, telling Barbara “of course one reads about it in the papers... wife swapping. It does happen you know.”

Cardiff believes that the portrayal of an anarchic, outside-the-norm lifestyle can often be fulfilling a middle-brow need to find justification for fears and prejudices. He gives the example of the portrayal of students in *The Young Ones* (1982, 1984) that helps confirm the common perception of students as useless layabouts (Cardiff, 1988, pp. 57-58). In this light the portrayal of the Goods opting out of the ‘typical’ suburban lifestyle epitomised by the Leadbetters is in some ways genuinely subversive because their radical lifestyle is shown as making them happy and fulfilled. However, Cantor argues that television executives attempt to meet the changing needs of the audience while “still, if pressed, supporting basic and traditional values” (Cantor, 1994, p.163), and Mick Bowes points out that sitcoms aimed at family audiences tend to reflect back the ideal of the family as strong and happy (Bowes, 1990, pp.128-140). Despite hints at wife-swapping and repressed sexual desires, the sexual behaviour of both couples is presented as entirely within the norms dictated by society at that time. Married men and women are shown as supportive of each other and it is clear that

adultery would mean disaster for the cosy married lives they have created for themselves. However daring, or foolhardy, the Goods may have been in digging up their garden, heterosexual monogamous married love is seen as the ideal. There are suggestions of marital frustration, but they are subconscious, both to the viewer and, it appears, to the writers. Dysfunctional familial relationships do exist in popular sitcoms, of course; *Steptoe and Son* and *Fawlty Towers* being prime examples, but with Tom and Barbara the writers created an almost preternaturally happy couple. In fact, Richard Briers had to persuade Esmonde and Larbey to write some rows for Tom and Barbara to make their relationship more realistic. Larbey denies any conscious attempt to preach the joys of marriage during an era obsessed with sex, but the message is still there.

Conclusion

In *The Good Life*, John Esmonde and Bob Larbey created the perfect family sitcom which contained little in the way of bad language or overt sexual content. Although this greatly suited the BBC because the show could be shown at prime time and garner large audiences, the evidence points to this being the result of the writers' own choices. They wrote from their own experience in the style they believed suited them and which came naturally.

Sex oozes through *The Good Life* but in a subtle form that audiences may have barely noticed. The opposition of civilisation versus nature is a constant source of this sexual undercurrent, while the unarticulated sexual tensions underneath the smooth surfaces of suburbia add a certain frisson. The characters and their relationships with each other all offer a source of identification for viewers, while the celebratory approach towards marriage is a source of reassurance and pleasure. The rounded, well written and acted characters enabled many different readings. Tom's mid-life crisis and desire to escape the rat race struck a chord. He was articulating a common middle-aged fear that time is running out and early hopes and dreams have remained unfulfilled. Audiences could, and did, deride the Goods for their notions of self-sufficiency and admire Margo for her assertive, realistic grasp of life and Jerry for his cool, laid-back approach. But they could also admire the Goods for their integrity and see the Leadbetters' lives as meaningless and empty.

Margo, an unusually well-rounded female sitcom character, appealed to viewers because of her interesting mix of vulnerability and strength and for her extraordinarily well-focused anger at the petty irritations of life. Margo is no monster, and underneath the façade her ability to love is never in doubt. Viewers were able to watch as her contact with a more natural, vital world gradually peeled layers off her armoured exterior to enable this softer, more vulnerable side to come through. In Margo, Esmonde and Larbey created a character so intriguing that viewers were able to read her in many different ways and create their own sexual meanings beyond the intentions of the authors.

The theme of achieving happiness by dropping out of the rat-race is genuinely subversive, and there are strong undercurrents of radical sexual ideas such as wife swapping. But the overt portrayal of sexual behaviour is conservative, with married fidelity portrayed as the route to sexual and personal fulfilment. Nevertheless, Esmonde and Larbey succeed in bringing nature, with all its dirt and uninhibited coupling, into the sterile surroundings of Surbiton.

Engaged by these themes, but secure in the knowledge the show was suitable for children, millions watched *The Good Life* and Margo became one of the genre's most enduring characters. Esmonde and Larbey refused to write for Keith again because they were aware that they would be under pressure to "write another Margo" and were unwilling to do that (Larbey, 2002), but the Margo character, albeit modified, lived on through Keith in various other roles, most notably as Audrey Forbes-Hamilton in *To The Manor Born*. *The Good Life* fulfilled the genre's key aim of attracting mass audiences while retaining an air of quality and authorial integrity. The positive response from critics and audiences encouraged the BBC to use Esmonde and Larbey again and to commission similar shows by like-minded writers in the future.

CHAPTER FIVE

Carla Lane and Butterflies

Introduction

During the 1970s most sitcom writers, producers and directors were men, who produced examinations of marriages and other sexual relationships from a male point of view. Carla Lane was, until recently, one of the few successful British female television sitcom writers in the history of the genre, but by 1978 her sole contribution to it was *The Liver Birds* (1969-79, 1996). This was a breakthrough series insofar as a woman writer had finally achieved a prime-time sitcom success and because the two protagonists were female. But in terms of sexual behaviour and sexual politics Sandra and Beryl were no radical feminists, despite the fact that their moment of televisual glory coincided with a surge of feminist activism. All they wanted to do was get married and, although they had jobs and wore short skirts, they gained no individual power or identity from their work and rather than enjoying their sexuality they used it to advertise themselves as possible wives.

Lane's second sitcom, *Butterflies*, was different – both in the way it stretched the genre by injecting a large dose of drama and in the manner in which it portrayed marriage as an institution which may not always serve a woman's best interests. But the show has also disappointed many feminist commentators who believe that although it identified a problem it offered little in the way of a solution and merely showed a heroine colluding in her own entrapment. I explore the relationship between Lane, the show she created and her critics and discover how her unique position within the BBC, her aims as a writer and her relationship with her audience shaped what many consider to be her finest work.

The Writer

Carla Lane had already spent several years writing *The Liver Birds* when the first episode of *Butterflies* was broadcast in November 1978. This new show was intended as something very different to *The Liver Birds*, which was a light-weight sitcom about two young girls sharing a Liverpool flat. Whereas that show was frothy, with the two girls spending most of their time talking about and dating men, but seemingly happy to remain virgins, *Butterflies* was much more dramatic in tone, was set in anonymous suburbia and was about a woman who, much like the heroine of the film *Brief Encounter* (dir. David Lean, 1945), was trapped by her own love and guilt in a boring marriage but also considering having an affair with another man.

Lane was a Liverpool housewife who had joined a writers' circle and had started getting short stories published by a magazine. She wrote a comedy sketch with her friend Myra Taylor and sent it to Michael Mills at the BBC. He believed it showed promise and urged the pair to go away and write a flat-sharing comedy, which subsequently became *The Liver Birds*. Lane admits to being 'nervous' when starting her career. Her early work on *The Liver Birds* was criticised and the format nearly given to another writer before Lane persuaded Mills to give her another try. The show became a hit and ran for years. *Butterflies* seems to have been largely autobiographical. Lane lived with a husband who, she believed, was emotionally repressed and unhappy that his two free-spirited sons would indulge in radical behaviour such as wearing pink shirts. She hated cooking and housework because she was bad at it, it gave her no satisfaction and it seemed a thankless, never-ending task. She told *The Daily Mail* in 1978 that, with *Butterflies*, she was "writing about a tragedy I knew all about. I identify with Ria. She is torn between loyalty to her husband and a desire to break out of the boredom of her marriage. And like Ria I'm a terrible cook, and the relationship she has with her sons is like the one I have with my own" (Skelly, 1978). Unlike the *Butterflies* heroine Ria, however, Lane was prepared to have an affair and leave the family home. Her marriage was over by the time she wrote *Butterflies*, and she was entering what she describes as a "beautiful time in my life". The show, she says, was intended to be a "celebration" of this (Lane, 2003).

Lane went on to write sitcoms for the BBC with varying degrees of success. Some of her subsequent shows, such as *Bread* (1986-91), were very successful; others, such as *Screaming* (1992), less so. Lane's shows tend to feature strong matriarchal characters, such as in *Bread*, or confused younger women trying to define their role in life, such as in *Solo* (1981-82).

The Actors

The focus of the show is bored housewife Ria played by experienced comedy actress Wendy Craig. Craig was already well known for her performances in domestic comedies about happy family life by Richard Waring such as *Not in Front of the Children* (1967-69) and *And Mother Makes Three* (1971-73). It was while working on the latter show that she first met Carla Lane, who worked on some of the scripts. Craig specialised in playing dizzy but lovable mothers and became such an icon of motherhood that strangers would ask for advice on how to bring up their own children; all of which added a certain edge to her playing a dissatisfied housewife. Craig was aware that playing a woman contemplating a divorce could be a risky move and that she risked alienating her fans. In an interview published at the time she said she was glad the show was broadcast on BBC2 and that she could "understand and sympathise with Ria's plight" (Crowley, 1978). In private, if co-star Geoffrey Palmer is to be believed, her view of the character was rather harsher. "I can remember the first read-through, and Wendy saying, 'How can I possibly play this appalling woman? She's got a perfectly reasonable husband, reasonable teenage children and a reasonable standard of living, and all she does is whinge'" (Selway, 2001).

Palmer played Ria's husband, Ben. Palmer was a distinguished actor who regularly appeared on television. But he was not a star, and probably only became more well-known to viewers when he appeared in the successful sitcom *The Rise and Fall of Reginald Perrin* (1976-79). *Butterflies* was his next major role. His seemingly naturally lugubrious manner and appearance made him perfect for the role of embittered dentist Ben. The couple's sons, Adam and Russell, were played by young actors Andrew Hall and Nicholas Lyndhurst. Lyndhurst was a hard-working child actor who had appeared in various children's shows, including *The Prince and the*

Pauper (1975) and *Anne of Avonlea* (1975), and had co-hosted the Saturday morning show *Our Show* (1976-78). His breakthrough role as an adult was as Fletcher's teenage son, Raymond, in the Ronnie Barker sitcom *Going Straight* (1978). He went on to star as the gormless Rodney in *Only Fools and Horses* (1981- present). Bruce Montague, who played Ria's prospective lover Leonard, seems to have done relatively little television work, either before or since *Butterflies*. He did appear, however, in *Whoops Apocalypse* (1982) and the sitcom *Sharon and Elsie* (1984).

The Production Process

The risqué subject matter and unusual comedy/drama form made executives at the BBC baulk when Lane presented them with the idea. According to Lane's version of events she went to see the head of comedy, John Howard Davies, and told him the outline of the story, including the fact that the heroine Ria never actually sleeps with her prospective lover Leonard. He shook his head and said the subject of adultery was more suited to drama than comedy and that "the viewers won't like it. We can't take that risk" (Lane, 1996, p. 75). Certainly, sitcom couples had previously been shown as rock-solid partnerships. They may have had their rows, and the figure of a nagging wife was a comic staple, but underneath they loved each other. The wife was ultimately happy to surrender to the husband's will, even if she were occasionally allowed to get the upper hand. There was never any question that she would leave him. Obvious examples of this sort of union include *George and Mildred* (1976-79), Margo and Jerry Leadbetter in *The Good Life*, June and Terry Fletcher in *Happy Ever After* (1974-78) and even, at a push, Basil and Sybil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* (1975,1979). Undeterred, Lane wrote a script, delivered it to his office two weeks later and received a handwritten note in reply saying, "Who am I to argue with a butterfly?" (Lane, 1996, pp.75-6).

BBC management, ever-aware of the need not to alienate its licence-fee paying audience, relied on its sitcoms to provide undemanding entertainment at a time in the schedule when they could help build an audience for other shows. On the other hand, managers and producers had a great deal of respect for the creative process and, specifically, for the art of writers. They were prepared to go out on a limb if they felt

the work deserved it. It seems likely that Lane, who had proved herself with *The Liver Birds*, and who had written a good script for *Butterflies*, benefited from this. Furthermore, the BBC was prepared to try out edgier shows after the watershed on its minority channel, BBC2.

The show was produced by two of the BBC's most experienced comedy producers, Sydney Lotterby and Gareth Gwenlan. Lane was often present in rehearsals and appears to have been willing to tweak scripts during the rehearsal process, admitting to changing a script on one occasion after one member of the cast was unhappy about another actor getting funnier lines (Lane, 1996, pp64-65) *Butterflies* was filmed in front of a studio audience and ran from 1978 until 1982. It gathered an average of 11m viewers – impressive for a BBC2 show.

Critical and Audience Reaction

Critical and audience reaction to the first show was immediately positive. Critics recognised Lane's skill at creating a sitcom dealing with a common but under-reported malaise that struck chords with the audience while remaining funny. *The Scotsman's* review of the first series compared it favourably with *The Liver Birds*. In that show, the reviewer said, Lane would "do anything for a laugh but in *Butterflies* there are signs of a more serious writer not quite daring to emerge" (December 16, 1978). *Broadcast* said Lane had "injected something very like real feeling" into the show (December 4, 1978), while *Television Today* said Lane had written "an intelligent woman's guide to living with contentment and, being an intelligent woman herself, had made it very funny" (November 16, 1978). The positive reviews continued throughout the sitcom's four series, both in the trade press and the newspapers. *Broadcast* was even more positive by 1980, describing the show as "a brilliant fictional creation which reflects, if obliquely, a real malaise of our time" (September 29, 1980). The same year, the *Daily Mail* called it "a touching, acutely observed series" (October 23, 1980) while the *Daily Telegraph* described it as "literate, civilised and sardonic" (October 23, 1980). By 1982 a new wave of talent had transformed British television comedy but *Butterflies*, although no longer perceived as being as radical in terms of structure or content, was as popular as ever.

Nina Myskow in the *Sunday People* said she was in floods of tears while watching the show and that it was “- well, wonderful. I cannot, honestly, imagine a more perfectly written, beautifully played half hour” (October 2, 1983).

The show was also appearing on American television screens by 1982 and was cited as a typical example of British television’s laissez-faire attitude towards sex. *The New York Times* declared on June 4 of that year that *Butterflies* “provides an informative demonstration of how British television is considerably less inhibited than its American counterpart when it comes to matters involving sex” (June 4, 1982). Two days later the same newspaper claimed the show was distinctly British and that “much of this can be traced to the fact that, just as Americans seem to be partial to violent action-adventure programmes, the British tend to be more comfortable with the subject of sex” (June 6, 1982).

The first show attracted only half a million viewers. Executives, who considered it “very funny”, thought that this may have been because its title caused it to be confused with a wildlife show (BBCWAC WPR, 15/11/78). However, routine audience research showed that between November 1978 and December 1979 the UK audience for *Butterflies* climbed to 8.2 million. This was despite the fact it was on BBC2 and followed a low-rated show. It attracted an upmarket audience: 66 per cent were in the A and A+ social category and 26 per cent in B (Hallam, 2001). Audience research in 1980 discovered that *Butterflies* was “a firm favourite with many of the sample audience, and was warmly praised for being well-written and consistently amusing entertainment” (BBCWAC, R9/7/164, AR report March/April, 1980). By 1983, *Butterflies* had the highest appreciation index of any other sitcom (Hallam, 2001). A 1984 Review of Audience Data found that *Butterflies* was one of BBC2’s most successful shows, putting on 5.9m viewers from the previous programme. It was particularly popular with women, the report found, and with people in higher social groups (BBC, 1984).

The show was not received entirely uncritically. *The Daily Telegraph* described Ria as a “slatternly housewife” (January 13, 1979) and some female viewers also found the Ria’s incompetence at cooking and housework unrealistic - one viewer said it added a “jarring note” to an otherwise believable portrayal (*Evening News*, January 31, 1979).

However, this was perceived as one of the few unrealistic aspects. Many women claimed it was like watching their own life on screen. As we have already seen, its realism can partly be explained by the fact that *Butterflies* was largely autobiographical; like Ria, Lane had been stuck in a marriage with an undemonstrative man and their two teenage sons. As well as realism, this autobiographical element arguably gives *Butterflies* a depth and poignancy that is missing from Lane's other sitcoms and viewers were quick to identify with Ria's dilemma. Wendy Craig, who played Ria, received hundreds of letters to that effect, while many more were written to Carla Lane, to newspapers and to the *Radio Times*. Mrs Marjorie Boardman from Wells praised the writing as "funny, perceptive and often touching" (*Radio Times*, November 8, 1980), while Farnborough housewife Valerie Waters told the *Evening News* that "many middle-aged mums like me can easily identify ourselves with Wendy Craig as Ria", although she adds sadly that "we probably don't have a charming Leonard to tempt us into a double life". She also claimed fathers could identify with the "long-suffering Ben" (January 31, 1979). Most reaction to the show was from women but Geoffrey Palmer's subtle portrayal of Ben - repressed, frightened by changes in society and his own life that he doesn't understand, and constantly provoked by his sexually active, freedom-loving teenage sons - was frequently praised by reviewers. Just as women responded to the Ria character, men seemed able to understand Ben's dilemma. Ewart Alexander in the *Western Mail*, for example, said "I share the husband's feelings of sometimes being lost in a maze of strange events" (September 20, 1980). Bernard Davies from *Broadcast*, meanwhile, said Ben had the "quiet desperation of a man out of his depth in a brave new world" (29 September, 1980), and Sean Day-Lewis in the *Daily Telegraph* said the Ben character was "a rich creation, both individual and universal" (October 23 1980).

The only occasion in which the show appeared to have gone too far for public taste had nothing to do with sex. In 'Pot', Ria's sons, Adam and Russell, smoke a marijuana joint and Ria herself decides to indulge in the hope it will make her troubles go away. This was seen by some viewers as condoning drug taking and three teenage girls, worried that they had been corrupted, wrote to the *Radio Times* to complain. Sydney Lotterby was forced to reply and his response suggests the BBC were prepared to censor Lane's work if they felt it necessary, despite the large amount of

creative freedom she enjoyed: "This particular script was subjected to much closer scrutiny than normal, and some changes were made for fear of misinterpretation," he wrote. However the drugs references were allowed, Lotterby said, because of the importance of "reflecting some of today's issues so that they can be aired and discussed in the home" (Lotterby, 1983). Lane maintains, however, that her scripts were not changed, so this was either a rare occurrence or the script was not scrutinised in the way Lotterby claimed.

BBC executives were delighted with the show. There were concerns that some might find the title off-putting and may not realise it was a sitcom, but most executives, especially women, felt that the show was fresh and enjoyable. Executives seemed as caught up in the show as viewers: at one of the weekly programme review board meetings there was speculation about whether Ria would hold out against temptation (BBCWAC WPR, 15/11/78). *Butterflies* was shown on BBC2, which meant it was unlikely to get viewing figures as high as a BBC1 prime-time comedy such as *The Good Life* or *Are You Being Served?*. The nature of its content made this inevitable; the BBC had initially baulked at the idea of showing *Butterflies* at all, and the minority channel was the natural home for such a daring show. However, audience reaction proved a comedy about adultery and marital boredom was acceptable to audiences in the late 1970s if it was of a high enough quality. Subsequently, Carla Lane was given a great deal of freedom to write what she wanted, whatever the sexual nature of the content. Post-*Butterflies* BBC executives trusted that, however unlikely it would seem that shows about divorce, mistresses, recovering alcoholics or families living on the dole would be popular with audiences, Lane knew what she was doing. Gareth Gwenlan said she was an uncompromising writer capable of writing 15 minutes of a sitcom which contained no laughs at all if she wanted to: "I always found it better to let her use, for want of a better phrase, her own professional and artistic integrity" (Sarler, 1990). According to Lane, her scripts were not interfered with: "I am a bit arrogant about my work... I don't see the point in working on a script and just handing it over to be chopped about" (Harbord, 1984) and she was given a free reign as far as subject matter was concerned: "I think they trust me now. If I wanted to do a thing about two lesbians who murder each other, they'd probably let me" (Simmonds, 1985).

It would be a mistake, however, to read this as a sudden acknowledgement by the male-dominated Light Entertainment Department that women writers were as worthy as men. Scriptwriter Jill Hyem has written about her experiences three years later when writing *Tenko*, a drama set in a women's prisoner of war camp (Hyem, 1987, pp. 151-163). She sensed hidden hostilities from the overwhelmingly male hierarchy of script editors, directors and producers, both to women writers and to 'unattractive' women characters. Lighting and music would be used to 'soften up' scenes, women talking about sex was considered unfeminine and any introspection on the part of male characters was dismissed as 'wet'. She had a similar experience to Lane; she battled for days to retain a storyline which featured lesbianism. Although today lesbian characters are commonplace, back in 1981 Hyem's producer Ken Riddington was convinced audiences would not accept lesbianism and it would mean "turn-off time". Nevertheless, the episode was broadcast on the condition the L-word was not actually used, and it received a positive audience reaction. Hyem describes this as an important breakthrough and says executives were far more willing to accept her judgement following this incident. As with Lane, it took time and proof that she understood her audience before executives trusted her. Thus only experienced and trusted women writers were allowed to explore controversial subjects relatively freely. The Light Entertainment Department tended to favour writers it knew and trusted and this rule applied to men as well as women, but men were unlikely to write about women's experiences from a feminine point of view. This may be what male executives, faced with scripts about an alien, female world they did not understand, found frightening.

Themes and Representation

Butterflies is a delicate balance between a show that defies the structures, themes and traditions of the sitcom genre and one that embraces them. In some respects it is the archetypal domestic comedy, similar to work written earlier in the decade by Richard Waring and Esmonde and Larbey. It focuses on a traditional family of a working father, housewife and two children who live in comfortable, if not wild, middle-class affluence. It certainly fulfils Mick Eaton's "timeless nowness" sitcom criterion in that it is set in a location which is unspecified but which is so bland it could be anywhere

and at a time that was intended to be 'now' (Eaton, 1978, pp. 61-89). Furthermore, it is a typical sitcom in that it examines human relationships in a situation in which a group of people are forced to interact with each other, whether they like it or not. It derives laughs from the characters themselves, their relationships with each other, and the situations in which they find themselves. Sitcom characters are also frequently trapped in certain situations; often traps of their own making. This is certainly true of Ria, who is trapped by the love of her family, and Ben, who is trapped by his own fear. On the other hand, many elements of *Butterflies* defy the rules of sitcom. Sitcom marriages are usually either preternaturally happy, in the manner of *The Good Life's* Tom and Barbara Good, or consist of a man pontificating or getting into scrapes while the woman acts as little more than a stooge, such as in *Shelley* (1979-92) or *Terry and June* (1979-87), or feature a down-trodden man at the mercy of his nagging wife, a device used by many, many sitcom writers – *George and Mildred* (1976-79) is the obvious example. But Ria and Ben are neither happy nor unhappy, and both seem somewhat worn-down by the passing of time. They love each other, and tell each other so, but Ben is frightened his best years are behind him. Lane quickly establishes this melancholy side to Ben. In 'When Ria Met Leonard' he says he used to be a "young and potent horse" but is tired because he has "jumped my 48th fence". Ria, meanwhile, tells prospective lover Leonard that "I'm happily married, but I'm not excitingly married."

The signature tune sets the tone of the show – a wistful ditty about the fragility and beauty of love. Ria wears gypsy-like floaty clothes and she herself appears to float through the set. Ben's generally dour mood, meanwhile, stands in stark contrast to the energetic purposefulness of his sons. Sexually active teenage children who behave in ways that baffle their parents frequently crop up in television comedy, and they help to widen the appeal of a show. This is the role Adam and Russell play in *Butterflies*, but in addition to providing comic relief, their behaviour serves to increase the perception of Ben as repressed, Ria frustrated, and the couple's marriage as stale. The teenagers constantly talk about sex, much to the horror of Ben who believes the modern world has become unnecessarily obsessed with it; presumably because he does not want to confront a subject that frightens him and makes him feel inadequate. All he wants, he tells Ria, is a "quiet, unobtrusive existence" and his beige and navy-blue clothes, mournful demeanour and tendency to play records of the chanting of

monks contrasts sharply with his sons' long hair, scruffy clothes and wild lifestyles. We get a hint that Ben was not always thus; he wooed and won Ria when he was a young dentist and she a patient and he apparently had a sense of humour then. He does love Ria, and tells her so, but his love is cold and unemotional. He suggests in "Thinking about a Job" that he has always found women unfathomable and frightening. Men are at "the perpetual mercy of women" and he tells Ria he plumped for her because she was the "most acceptable" – hardly what a woman wants to hear! Nevertheless, Lane resists the temptation to portray Ria as the sole victim of the situation, worn down by a naturally boring, repressed man; he too is a victim – in his case because of the pressures of building a career and raising a family. "What happened?" asks Ria in when discussing why they have changed so much. "The world happened", he replies. It seems clear that this description of middle-aged angst sprang directly from Lane's own experience, thus giving the scripts power and authenticity. In her autobiography Lane describes her ex-husband's puzzlement at what was happening to his family:

"He knew by now that I was on a lead of cotton and that his children had taken a strange and unfathomable path away from him. I wanted to hold him and perhaps comfort him, but I couldn't because I knew that soon I would want to leave him" (Lane, 1996, p.46).

Much of the action is centred on the kitchen – scene of Ria's daily torment. The inability of the wife to cook is a common source of humour in comedy. It is also played for laughs in *Butterflies*, which can be seen as problematic. In some ways the suggestion that Ria is a dizzy female is typical of the way writers take the threat out of strong women – Mary Tyler Moore is an example and, more recently, Ally McBeal was portrayed in this way. However, Ria's inability to cook can also be seen as subversive. From the 1950s to the 1980s being able to cook well and nourish her family were seen as basic wifely duties, and a failure to fulfil them was very much a failure on the part of the woman herself. Changes in lifestyle and the greater availability and acceptability of processed, takeaway and ready-prepared food mean the ability to cook is nowhere near as important a skill for homemakers today. But in the 1970s, even after a wave of feminist activism, the Oxo mum was still very much the norm. When Ria's son Adam said "I thought cooking came naturally to a woman"

he was expressing a common belief (although Russell's response "maybe she's ahead of her time" was prescient).

In contrast, Ria's obvious unsuitability for her role in life is quite a radical notion. We are encouraged to laugh at her efforts and sympathise with her, but we do not judge her. Ria is very much a housewife – her husband will not even pour his own coffee and when she declares that "I devote my entire existence to this family ship" Ben, Adam and Russell respond as if this thought had never before occurred to them. Ria's hatred of, and lack of competence in, housework is clearly a source of her frustration – trapping her in a role which takes up all her time but gives her no joy, and for which she is unsuited: "Do I have to spend my days in this brick prison, pushing this thing (a Hoover) around?" she asks in "Breaking the Silence". She wants a life of love, sex and romance. Instead it revolves around an undemonstrative, repressed husband and a daily battle with the cooker. The concept that housework could provoke this sort of reaction from a woman was new to sitcom. The fact that Lane projects her own fears and frustrations onto Ria (Lane describes her cakes as 'road blocks') also adds a note of dramatic authenticity. Lane herself, however, explains her fascination with Ria's cooking purely in terms of its comic potential, despite her obvious identification with Ria's plight:

"I planned it right away that she couldn't cook, so the moment he said 'your mother's doing the dinner', everybody laughed. It was a bonus because I didn't have to write a funny line" (*Playing Mum*, 1998).

Ria's domestic routine is disturbed when she meets Leonard and the two become strongly attracted to each other. The strangely detached, unconsummated nature of this relationship suggests that Ria, rather than genuinely being in love with Leonard, is merely channelling her frustrations into him. Stuck in her 'brick prison' she is unable to express any side of her personality other than being a wife and mother. In this way Ria's desire for romance, criticised by feminists as a woman throwing herself into the traps laid for her by men, could instead be seen as a way of escaping her confinement. She wants a job but is expressly forbidden by Ben from getting one – he believes it is his job to support his family. Unable to express herself and develop her individuality through work, Ria fixates instead on romance as a way of changing her

unsatisfying life. Lane ostensibly avoided making her heroine physically adulterous because she was worried about the audience losing sympathy for her; but the nature of Ria's emotions make sex somewhat beside the point. Her family is her life but she wants more, which is why she comes so close to actually having an affair. But it is not love she is craving – she already has that from her family – it is romance; and romance would be easily shattered by the day-to-day strains of a real sexual relationship with Leonard.

Until this time, marital infidelity had usually been portrayed in comedy as an improbably unattractive man winking at pretty young girls and then being hit on the head with a frying pan by his battleaxe wife. This is certainly the spirit in which it had been treated in *Are You Being Served*. But in *Butterflies* it is the woman who considers embarking on an affair and her dilemma places her in real pain. When they become mothers, female characters in television comedy are rarely portrayed as sexual beings, but Lane shows that this is more as a result of male writers' difficulty with female sexuality rather than because of a real loss of sexual desire in middle aged women. Ria describes herself as "a seething, pulsating, frustrated mass" and she is clearly excited about the thought of having a fling with Leonard. However it is ego-boosting, but safe, romance she really craves and she projects this desire onto Leonard. He himself becomes trapped and sexually castrated by Ria's love and the guilt that make it impossible for her to betray her husband. Leonard himself is in some ways the archetypal sitcom bachelor, improbably hopping into bed with girls 20 years younger than him. But whereas a male sitcom writer may have used the character to explore the possibilities of freedom from a monogamous relationship, Lane presents Leonard as a somewhat pathetic figure who is able to recognise that casual sex with young girls is not really meeting his emotional needs – hence his pursuit of Ria.

Understandably, feminist commentators have seized upon *Butterflies* as the first genuine attempt by a comedy series to represent accurately the lives of millions of housewives and to show that women as well as men can feel trapped by marriage. Opinions differ, however, on whether or not *Butterflies* is a truly radical feminist text or just another re-tread of the typical sitcom portrayal of sexual relationships.

Terry Lovell says Ria is representative of a social type and that the humour of *Butterflies* is engendered by our recognition of how far removed the romantic ideal of love is from its reality. Lovell does not consider *Butterflies* to be the feminist text it may appear. For her it merely fulfils the same function as many other contemporary sitcoms: encouraging an acceptance of the way things are:

“The social comedies familiar in contemporary sitcom frequently work to produce tolerant acceptance of an imperfect but after all human world. Carla Lane’s not-quite-sitcoms generate a wry smile of recognition and at best the wish that things might be better, rather than any urgent sense that they can and ought to be” (Lovell, 1982, p.28).

Frances Gray also has little time for Ria’s musings. She believes Lane allows her character to collude in her own lack of status by presenting her merely in terms of her relationships with others - Ria is defined by the men in her life and does not question this. She does question the boredom she feels and the mind-numbing, pointless housework she is expected to do, but only because it does not fit in with her desire for her life to be romantic. As soon as Ben yields to her demands for sex, somehow everything is all right again and Leonard becomes just another outsider voyeuristically looking in. Gray believes that Ria “has virtually no existence that is not sexual” (Gray, 1994, p.94). Maggie Andrews, however, is more forgiving, pointing out that at least ‘housewives comedy’ was a genre in which women were the main focus of the text and not just a stooge for a man. *Butterflies* also, she observes, coincided with a contemporary debate about the slave-like status of housewives and helped to refute the myth that women are somehow naturally gifted in and fulfilled by housework (Andrews, 1998, pp. 58-63).

Lane’s position within this debate was a difficult one because as a female sitcom writer she was one of a rare breed and so was bound to be seized upon as the great white hope for female comedy. She herself said the reason for the lack of women comedy writers could be that women are too busy with their domestic lives, that they are frightened to be funny because men don’t like funny women, or that comedy is just too intimidating a genre for them. She believed she articulated events and relationships in women’s lives no man could understand, such as the conversations

between Ria and her cleaner or the frustrations of being a housewife. But she says she had no intention of being someone who “writes about women” and points out that most of the characters in *Butterflies* are men (Lane, 2003). She resists the term ‘feminist’, and in one early interview actually said she dislikes women. She was aware of the negative opinions some feminists had towards *Butterflies* but was unapologetic about her creation:

“A lot of liberated ladies thought that I painted my women far too humbly and that they were motivated by men and love, and of course my answer to that is, so we are. I think a lot of liberated ladies wander around making loud declarations, but actually they sit by the phone, drool as much as anyone else – they’re just pathetic when they’re in love, and I really don’t see the point in denying it” (Boyd, 1984).

Ria’s somewhat naïve view of romantic love and her tendency towards self-obsession do little to suggest the problem lies in marriage as an institution rather than in Ria’s own head. Gillian Swanson points out that, often, subversive thoughts and behaviour are the result of individual sitcom characters’ personalities and the unique situations they find themselves in (Swanson, 1982b, p.35). In this way we can explain Ria’s problems as resulting from the type of person she is rather than from the problems inherent in marriage. However, Janet Woollacott sees *Butterflies*’ radicalism, or lack of it, as being somewhat beside the point when assessing its impact; “Regardless of whether a series like *Butterflies* truly ‘subverts’ or really ‘incorporates’, it does move its viewers on to a different set of ideological coordinates in relation to extramarital sex on the woman’s part in terms of past handlings of this theme in situation comedies” (Woollacott, 1996, p.292). Medhurst and Tuck talk about the way in which *George and Mildred* is a comedy of ‘reinforcement and convention’ which teaches the lesson that marriage may have its ups and downs but you might as well grit your teeth and make the best of it – George and Mildred are meant to be together and that’s the end of it (Medhurst and Tuck, 1982, p. 46). It seems to me this is where Lane’s power really lies. *Butterflies* manages to avoid this easy conclusion, instead exploring the real tensions and frustrations underlying many marriages. Ria resists temptation, but we are never entirely sure if this is the correct decision.

As we have already seen, it took Lane time to build up the trust of executives and prove to them these subject matters were valid and would not provoke outrage. As a result of her success in achieving this, female audiences were finally able to identify with a female sitcom protagonist who was neither a dollybird nor a battleaxe. Most sitcom writers refused to acknowledge that older women could be sexual creatures at all, which is why the sexuality of characters such as Mrs Slocombe and Margo Leadbetter is warped into either displays of frustrated lust that we are meant to find comical, or an obsession with propriety and appearances. Lane, however, showed sitcom viewers that middle-aged women could have complex sexual and emotional needs.

However, Lane does not allow her heroine to actually take the plunge into infidelity. Her decision was partly based on the practical considerations of what the audience, and thus the BBC, would accept in terms of sexual behaviour and is another example of a writer censoring his or her own work before even submitting scripts. When she wrote *Butterflies* it was not her intention that the lovers would actually have sex. When she initially approached the head of comedy with the idea for the series she clearly stated that Ria and Leonard never make love, and subsequently explained this was because she did not want the audience to lose sympathy for her heroine: "Of course I have had to make compromises on TV, you always do. I had to set up her love and her loyalty to her family. If I hadn't people would never have accepted her. People don't really want to see the unvarnished truth on TV. If I really wrote a comedy about adultery it would send Bill Cotton and the BBC into apoplexy" (Jackson, 1978). Furthermore, sexual explicitness was not Lane's style. This is also apparent in *The Liver Birds* which, despite being about sexy young girls sharing a flat at the height of the sexual revolution, is remarkably sexless. Instead it shows the girls longing for love, romance and marriage. At the time Lane said she did not think women talking about their sex lives was funny, merely coarse: "Despite what other women say, I think that, basically, we are the gentle sex" (*Radio Times*, 1975).

In this manner, Lane's approach to the problems of middle-aged housewives was not radical. She did not condone sexual relationships with other partners and was aware that many members of the audience for *Butterflies* still considered marital infidelity wrong. The lack of sex was a useful way of toning down any backlash from viewers

upset at the flouting of widely accepted standards of morality. It meant *Butterflies* could be watched together as a family, which boosted ratings and pleased the vast swathe of middle England that contains many of the BBC's viewers. Jean Stone from Cumbria wrote to the *Radio Times* because she was pleased the show dealt with sex without being so tasteless as to show people actually doing the deed: the fact that Ria and Leonard never consummate their relationship meant *Butterflies* was able show "sex without crudity and sickness" (November 8, 1980). It also added a certain 'will-they, won't they' sexual tension. This can be a powerful dramatic tool, adding a certain frisson that can keep viewers hooked on a programme. Furthermore, the fact that Ria and Leonard never actually went to bed proved comforting to viewers for another reason. Many women brought up before the increased sexual freedom of the 1960s may have been feeling as dissatisfied as Ria, but their fear and sense of duty would not allow them to seek comfort outside their marriage. They could identify with her sense of entrapment, while perceiving her lack of action as condoning their own.

However, Lane's unique position at the time as a very successful female sitcom writer lumbered her with a burden male writers were not expected to carry. She was not allowed just to portray the world as she saw it, but was meant to explain it and put it right as well. Lane never claimed to be a feminist, describing herself as someone who just missed the boat of feminism. She still felt guilty if she failed to properly discharge her domestic duties – a guilt younger generations of women seemed to have shrugged off; "When the great crater of freedom opened up for my species I refused to jump" (Lane, 1978). Despite this, Lane was seen as the voice of millions of married women. She received far more interest from journalists than male sitcom writers and the resulting articles had a greater tendency to focus on her personal life and personal beliefs. This meant much more was made of how her failed marriage and eccentricities could have influenced her creation of Ria and Ben's marriage than, say, how Esmonde and Larbey's marriages may have filtered into the couples in *The Good Life*. Subsequently this helped foster a belief in the audience that, unlike many other sitcoms, the show was validated by its real insights into the human condition rather than just its ability to entertain. This status of almost being a social document rather than just a comedy increased the expectation that it would present a solution as well as define a problem. Its often serious tone also encouraged audiences to consider it more

'realistic' than other sitcoms. Audience research found that, for most viewers, the "increased seriousness in tone... increased the series' credibility" (BBC, 1980).

Lane is inconsistent about whether comedy can be realistic. In one breath she talks about the need to protect her audiences, while in another she defends her right to use swear words because "comedy is real" (Lane, 1991). This inconsistency makes reading *Butterflies* as a realist text problematic and helps to illustrate that expecting any text to solve social problems is asking a lot – especially in a genre which primarily aims to make people laugh.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that issues directly related to women's real lives – marital boredom, familial love, the unfulfilling nature of housework – were being tackled for the very first time. As a result many women found the programme pleasurable to watch and could identify with the Ria character. Julia Hallam believes Craig's great strength as an actor is her emotional credibility and her ability to engender feelings of identification in female viewers (Hallam, 2001). In this way *Butterflies* echoes Ien Ang's observations about how female viewers of the soap opera *Dallas* responded to Sue Ellen – alcoholic wife of the wicked JR. Despite her self-destructive tendencies, her seeming inability to escape an unhappy marriage and the fact she defined herself entirely by her relationship to her husband, Sue Ellen was popular with women because, according to one viewer, "she has a psychologically believable character. As she is, I am myself to a lesser degree" (Ang, 1993, p.124). Dorothy Hobson's work on female audiences has reached similar conclusions. She found that women like to connect emotionally with people they watch on television and are more interested in personalities and emotions surrounding events, and the extent to which they can identify with the situation and empathise with the emotions, than the event itself (Hobson, 1980, p.112-114). Hobson's work on *Butterflies* is also of interest here: she discovered that women viewers identified with Ria and enjoyed the realism of the show, but they also accepted that *Butterflies* is supposed to be a comedy and so made allowances for 'non-realistic' comic elements, such as Ria's inability to cook (Curtis, 1982, p.7). In this way, the show's lack of answers, and Ria's seeming unwillingness to take action to change her life, did not stop viewers gaining pleasure from it. Lane was aware that it was exposing a problem, rather than solving it, that gave the show its power with audiences. "It's the story of most

women's lives whether they admit it or not. If you write about something which people are loath to admit, you are on to a winner because you are unfolding their story and each person for a different reason has a different thought about it" (Harbord, 1984). The show did not give answers. Instead it encouraged women to think of their lives in new ways: looking back at the series one woman remarked that Ria "made you question the point of it all" (Hallam, 2001).

Conclusion

Butterflies pushed the boundaries of sitcom in terms of content and form. Lane succeeded in creating a comedy that made serious and valid points about marriage and the lives of married women. The BBC made no real effort to indulge female comedy writers at this time, and could be unsympathetic to challenging new portrayals of women. However, Lane benefited from BBC executives' ability to spot a good script, their willingness to go out on a limb for material they instinctively felt was worthwhile and their trust in writers who had proven their ability to please audiences.

Butterflies pulled off the tricky task of provoking the same pleasurable responses in women as soap opera and melodrama, but within a comic genre. Sitcom had previously treated marriage as either a trap for men or as an unrealistically joyous union, and many women were grateful for the chance to identify with a marriage that more closely resembled their own. Although its answers were muddled, it did at least pose the question of what marriage actually means and how it affects people's lives.

Of course, the lack of explicit sexual activity enabled *Butterflies* to be viewed by a mass family audience, and this could be perceived as a compromise. But it also shifted the focus onto Ria's emotional needs. Previously sitcom women tended to be defined by their sexual desirability, or lack of it, and it was taken for granted that marriage was enough to make women happy. What they actually felt was not at the heart of the story. With Ria, a more complex picture emerges of the inner lives of women. Their emotional vulnerability and need for romance and emotional intimacy is seen to be equally, if not more, important than their sexual urges. The positive response from female viewers shows that this resonated with their own feelings and

experiences. A new kind of sitcom woman had emerged, and Lane's strong relationship with her audiences made her an invaluable asset to the BBC.

CHAPTER SIX

Alternative Comedy and The Young Ones

Introduction

In 1982 *The Young Ones* was broadcast for the first time. It was a show that in many ways appeared different to what had gone before and it helped establish a new generation of comic actors, performers and writers. The so-called 'alternative comedians' who worked on it were known for shunning what they perceived to be the racism and sexism of previous generations of comedians and *The Young Ones* marked a shift in comedy towards the sensibilities of younger viewers. But if we look beyond the innovations in form and language, is *The Young Ones* really saying anything radical about sexual and familial relationships, gender roles or sexual identity? And how did the circumstances of its production and attempts by programme makers to respond to a shift in comic tastes and patterns of television viewing help or hinder its quest to take the sitcom genre somewhere new?

The Writers and Actors

The phrase 'alternative comedy' was used during the 1980s to describe a group of writers and performers who advocated a new approach to comedy. Previously comedians had tended to work in northern theatres and working men's clubs, or on television variety shows, and their 'gags' often relied on stereotypical notions of women or ethnic minority groups. But by the end of the 1970s a new type of venue, and performer, was emerging. Their work was more observational and political and they attempted to see beyond social and sexual stereotypes. They also had a tendency towards verbal and physical anarchy. This new breed had often attended university and developed their comic skills on the London cabaret circuit. This meant alternative comedians were more likely to perform to a sophisticated metropolitan audience. The Comedy Store is often considered to be the first of this type of venue and gave much of the new talent its first break, including Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer, Adrian Edmondson and compere Alexi Sayle. Its owner, Peter Rosengard, promised

performers that anything went and that there would be no censorship. This was not strictly true because racist and sexist material was not allowed, but swearing was positively encouraged and many acts had a surreal, politically radical or even violent edge. This new comedy also differed from the previous 'new wave' of cerebral, abstract, Oxbridge-educated comedic talent in the late 1960s, such as the *Monty Python* team. Alternative comedians tended to have studied at red-brick universities rather than Oxbridge. Mayall, Mayer and Ben Elton all went to Manchester.

When this new generation of comedians eventually broke through into television comedy, they proved to have a far-reaching and long-term influence. The driving force behind *The Young Ones* was a partnership between Rik Mayall and his girlfriend Lise Mayer. Mayall's parents had been drama teachers and he had experience of performing from childhood. At university he met Adrian Edmondson and the pair started their own comedy group, 20th Century Coyote. They had a successful show at the Edinburgh Festival and made appearances at the Comedy Store. Their double act, The Dangerous Brothers, was surreal and violent. Another of the characters created by Mayall, investigative reporter and bad poet Kevin Turvey, later appeared in the BBC comedy sketch show *A Kick Up The Eighties* (1981, 1984). Mayall has claimed his comedy has no message: "My comedy is a lot less pointed than other people's - the meaninglessness of my comedy is really the message" (Rik Mayall Website, online). Elsewhere he calls himself an "anarcho-surrealist" (Brooks, 2002). However, at this point in his career he does seem to have had political views. When his father's college shut down he blamed Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and in a 1984 appearance on chat show *Wogan* he talked about "bringing down the state". On the same show he also called Mrs Thatcher a Nazi, but this was cut (Dixon, 1984).

The idea for *The Young Ones* sprang from a conversation between Mayall and Mayer about how horrific it would be to live with the Rik/Kevin Turvey character. They developed the idea to include Adrian Edmondson's Dangerous Brother character, which became a blueprint for Vyvyan. They also added fellow cabaret performer Nigel Planer's character, Neil, and a character based around the 'cool' persona of one of the circuit's leading lights, Peter Richardson. Performer and writer Ben Elton was brought in by Mayall and Mayer to help them with the writing. Elton was a fellow graduate of Manchester University and worked on the same alternative comedy

circuit. He later achieved great fame and was known for his anti-Thatcher rants and right-on attitude towards women and sex.

Mayall denies the show was part of a deliberate career plan:

“I was living with Lise at the time, and that’s when we thought, hey, we could all be on telly. It would be fantastic. We could all be living in the same house, and we could have two double acts; me and Ade; Peter and Nigel, and Alexei could be the fucking landlord! We could do whatever we wanted! So we wrote it, and sent it off, and they said yes...” (The Oxford Student, online).

Ben Elton, however, downplays the anarchic element of the show’s creation: “It wasn’t incredibly wacky and zany and anarchic, because you just can’t produce a really quite complicated piece of physical comedy when you’re having a laugh (michael.phatcatz.net, online).

Mayall credits the other performers for fleshing out their characters and injecting a certain amount of their own comic skill into their portrayals. He said that originally the four characters were all intended to be “complete wankers” (Jackson, 1984) but Nigel Planer played Neil for sympathy and Edmondson complicated his portrayal of a punk by adding elements of heavy metal and the skinhead culture to create an amalgam of macho youth cults.

The Production Process

By the end of the 1970s BBC television sitcoms, although moderately successful, were hardly groundbreaking in their form or in the nature of their content. In 1979, in addition to the genuinely groundbreaking *Butterflies*, the BBC’s sitcom output included *Are You Being Served?*, *Terry and June*, *To the Manor Born*, Roy Clarke’s *Potter* (1979-83) about a retired busybody, the Clive Dunn vehicle *Grandad* (1979-84) and *Two Up Two Down* (1979) about a couple who find strangers living in their home, presumably with hilarious consequences. If comedy had fallen into familiar

patterns, certain executives could offer possible explanations. Gareth Gwenlan, talking about the difficult decisions involved when running a comedy department, recognised the temptation to leave successful shows on the air for perhaps longer than was wise in order to keep the high viewing figures these shows generated. The downside, he realised, as well as possibly watching the quality of the shows decline, was that new writers found it harder to get their shows made because there was so little space left in the schedule (*Television Today*, 1985). Veteran producer Sydney Lotterby had similar views: “It may be (comedy writers) are asked to go on writing too long, or because there aren’t enough writers and some who are new to the trade are copying the successful ones” (*Television Today*, 1980b).

But both Lotterby and Bill Cotton sensed that things could be about to change. Cotton believed that every ten years or so audiences, especially young people, seek out more innovative shows that test the boundaries of what is acceptable (Cotton, 1989).

Lotterby, while accepting the need for “bread and butter comedy”, said that “every now and then a series breaks new ground and one hopes that it might be a trend” (*Television Today*, 1980b). At this time there was, according to successful comedy producer Geoff Posner, a subtle shift in the way things were done. Producers began to take a more active role in seeking out new talent and there was a move away from the system in which “an all-seeing head of department would simply hand a producer a show to do” (Wallace, 1999). Comedy has a tendency to be more challenging during some periods than at others. Throughout the confusing, unstable 1970s, comedy had tended to be gentle and reassuring and it retreated from the satire and surrealism of the previous decade. By the time *The Young Ones* appeared, however, the rise of Thatcherism had created a much more confrontational climate and comedy was again considered a suitable forum for questioning political and societal values. It was in this climate that the new generation of ‘alternative comedians’ were working and they naturally turned to the genre they had grown up with – sitcom – to explore these issues.

At the same time as alternative comedy began to develop in the London clubs, another key figure in the birth of *The Young Ones*, Paul Jackson, was working his way up the BBC hierarchy. He joined the BBC in the early 1970s, following in the footsteps of his father who was a light entertainment producer. Jackson junior, who worked on

many light entertainment programmes, including *Top of the Pops* (1964-), *Blankety Blank* (1977-89) and *The Two Ronnies* (1971-87), had risen through the ranks from floor assistant to assistant floor manager, director and producer. He became interested in the alternative comedy movement after a night out at the Comedy Store and put in a proposal for a 26-week series showcasing the best acts on the London cabaret circuit. Head of variety Robin Nash agreed to a pilot and Jackson hired a string of acts, including Rik Mayall and Nigel Planer. The cabaret-style show was called *Boom Boom, Out Go The Lights* (1980-81), and, when broadcast, received a very small audience and a low reaction index of 46. Nevertheless a second show was made and the BBC asked Mayall to reproduce his Kevin Turvey act in *A Kick Up The Eighties*.

Mayall took the idea for *The Young Ones* to Paul Jackson because of the producer's previous work on *Boom Boom, Out Go the Lights* and because, according to Jackson, "I was the only television bloke he knew" (*The History of Alternative Comedy*, BBC, ep. 2). Jackson was excited by the idea because it reminded him of his days in student digs in Exeter. Rik Mayall believes Jackson knew alternative comedy was about to take off and that he wanted to be "the first to break this new ground on television" (Jackson, 1984). But the writers also felt Jackson 'believed in them' and certainly Jackson himself felt the writers' red brick education gave their work a "different substance, a different tone of voice" (Davies, 1995). The choice of Jackson was undoubtedly important; there were few producers in the BBC at this time likely to have handled the material with such skill. Comedy producer John Lloyd remembers the script arriving covered in squiggles and Marmite stains: "I'd have wanted to tidy it up and sanitise it, but Paul saw it as a brilliant piece of TV anarchy and left it as it was" (Rumbold, 1991).

It is a testament to the willingness of the BBC to let its producers experiment at this time that the show was made at all, because few executives seemed really to understand what it was they were planning to broadcast. Paul Jackson had a track record of working successfully with the new wave of comedians, and was actively aiming to create something new. He had an extreme dislike of sitcoms such as *The Good Life*, which he called the distorted result of "an over-satisfied brain overdosing on sugar" (Harbord, 1986). This was reflected in the episode 'Sick' in which Vyvyan rants about how much he hates the show:

I hate it!! It's so bloody nice! Felicity 'Treacle' Kendall and Richard 'Sugar-Flavoured-Snot' Briers!! What do they do now?! Chocolate bloody Button ads, that's what!! They're just a couple of reactionary stereotypes, confirming the myth that everyone in Britain is a lovable, middle-class eccentric - and I - HATE - THEM!!

Jackson was of the opinion that most sitcoms were aimed at audiences which the BBC perceived to be “white, middle-class, middle-aged and middle-income, and programmes are made which they will understand. So you get this never ending plethora of suburban sitcoms” (Shearman, 1985). He believed *The Young Ones*, despite the lack of formal realism, was in some way more realistic than what went before, because it was written by people who did not fit into the usual mould of sitcom writers. Nevertheless Jackson claims he, along with Mayall and Mayer, were once told to “write an essay justifying what we were doing” (Shearman, 1985) and Jackson and the writers had several rows about content with the light entertainment executives. On one occasion there were complaints about a scene set at a party in which Vyvyan was “fucking the floor”. This stayed in after Jackson pointed out he was, in fact, doing push-ups. The three did agree to the word ‘wank’ being obscured by the sound of a bus bell, and also to cutting a scene involving the eating of dog faeces. But they stood their ground over another scene in which Rik plays with a tampon because he believes it to be a telescope with a mouse inside. Head of light entertainment Jim Moir was “too embarrassed” to argue with Lise Mayer, Mayall claims, after she accused him of implying there is something obscene about women having periods (Jackson, 1984). Another visual joke in which two teddy bears are having sex on Rick’s bed just before he enters was also cut. In the second series, Mayall claims they fooled executives by putting mildly obscene language directly after an absolutely filthy scene: “And so they said, ‘Well, that’s OUT!’ and of course they missed the ‘wanker’ on the next page ‘cos they were too busy tearing out that page!” (Dixon, 1984). Mayer and Mayall deny, however, that they were deliberately trying to shock. Instead, they argue, they were only interested in making people laugh (Dixon, 1984).

Throughout the 1970s, the BBC tended to allow its trusted sitcom writers a large degree of freedom, even when they wrote about middle-aged women's pussies or women considering adultery. *The Young Ones* was more heavily censored than many sitcoms, but Mayall and Jackson agree that they probably received more support and were given more freedom than they could have expected: "Because of the show's intrinsic subject matter it was carefully monitored by BBC executives, but by and large the process was friendly and co-operative," Jackson claims (Jackson, 2004).

However, the BBC was not just motivated by the desire for artistic freedom. The launch of Channel 4, with its stated mission to innovate and its direct appeal to specific societal sub-groups, threw down a gauntlet. In many ways its content would be in direct competition with the BBC's own minority channel BBC2, which also featured shows aimed at specialist, rather than mass, audiences. The launch of the much more radical Channel Four, however, meant there was "tremendous potential to bring new talent" onto the screen that could be aimed at social groups not previously targeted (Jackson, 2004). There was more screen time to fill with edgy new programmes and these did not have to appeal to all the different members of a family; one person sitting alone was still considered an audience. One of the stated aims of the new channel was to cater for people traditionally not well served by television, including black people, homosexuals and young viewers: "Young people watched little television; they had better things to do. But they deserved a service" (Isaacs, 1989, p.29).

Through its own audience research the BBC knew that programmes starring young performers and featuring "bizarre elements" attracted young audiences. This research also suggested younger people were far less likely to be offended by swearing or sexual content than older people and that older viewers disliked programmes which questioned traditional norms and which were remote from their perception of everyday reality (Field, 1977/82). Furthermore, executives were experienced enough to know that after a few years television genres can become stale and must change in order to meet audience demands for something different. In these circumstances it was necessary to take risks. With *The Young Ones*, the BBC appeared to be willing to take this risk and both Paul Jackson and Rik Mayall have acknowledged this. Jackson said that over both series "the BBC were incredibly supportive. I mean, it was challenging

at the time” (Wilmot and Rosengard, 1989, p.105) and, while discussing his victory over the tampon scene, admits that although they may have been middle-aged, executives were capable of taking brave decisions; “You have to remember who you’re dealing with here, which is middle-aged men, who have to answer to older middle-aged men, and I thought that was a very good decision on their part” (Wilmot and Rosengard, 1989, p.106) Mayall said that “all the way through the BBC were cautiously supportive” (Jackson, 1984). It should be remembered, however, that Mayall was more powerful than many sitcom writers because he was also one of the stars. He was thus in a far better position to maintain the purity of his vision during the production process, a time when subtle changes by the producer or actors can have a significant impact on the end product.

But although the BBC was going out on a limb with *The Young Ones*, as with *Butterflies* the ability to schedule it on the minority channel meant it could be presented as a sitcom aimed at a certain segment of the audience rather than at family audiences. It was also scheduled after the watershed - a clear indication that, despite its cartoonish qualities, it was not intended for children. Tunstall points out that high ratings were never the primary aim of alternative comedy writers and producers. He claims they “adopted deliberately non-commercial approaches” (Tunstall, 1993, p.128). However, their programmes did have the benefit of receiving serious critical attention and devoted cult audiences.

Peter Richardson, the original Mike, was dropped from the project because he and Jackson had had a furious row during the filming of *Boom Boom...* and, following auditions, Christopher Ryan was brought in to play the part. The BBC gave the go-ahead for a pilot, spurred on, most of the participants believe, by the news that Richardson was working with Channel 4. The pilot was reasonably well received by an invited studio audience and a series was commissioned. The show was taped in front of a live studio audience. The first season of six shows was broadcast in November and December 1982, and repeated in May and June 1983. The second season was broadcast in May and June 1984. Jackson was, by this time, working as a freelance, rather than on the BBC staff. Both seasons were repeated together in 1985 and are still regularly repeated on terrestrial and satellite television.

Mayall claims the BBC wanted a third series, but that he turned them down because “all the jokes have been told in that context, all the things we wanted to say have been said and... the second series wasn't as effective as the first because you'd seen (it done already). I think, inevitably, you'd keep going down levels if you kept on doing more episodes” (Dixon, 1984). The characters' popularity with the public lived on for a while after the show ended, however. There was a highly successful spin-off book, *Bachelor Boys* (1984), which was being reprinted as late as 1989. Nigel Planer made many subsequent appearances as his character, Neil, and produced a book, *Neil's Book of the Dead* (1985), two singles and an album. The whole team got back together one more time to record the record *Living Doll* with Cliff Richard for Comic Relief in 1986.

Critical and audience reaction

With hindsight, it is possible to see how important *The Young Ones* was in terms of introducing alternative comedy to television viewers, its playfulness with form and the BBC's willingness to target just one segment of the audience. Most of the sitcoms previously made by the BBC were straightforward realist narratives with plausible characters and plots aimed at family audiences. *The Young Ones*, with its elements of fantasy and anarchy, was different, and the writers delighted in challenging viewers rather than creating a show which its audience found comforting. This inevitably meant critical reaction to it was polarised.

The programme was attracted controversy before it was even broadcast. The BBC did not arrange for any preview articles in the *Radio Times* but did wheel the four lead actors out for press interviews, with fairly predictable results. Journalists seemed unsure what to make of the show; they refrained from predicting its failure, but warned viewers they were in for something unlike anything they had seen before. Garth Pearce from the *Daily Express* was somewhat nonplussed by the attitude of the actors during his interview; Rik Mayall referred all questions to his agent and Adrian Edmondson sat in silence with a girlfriend draped around him. Pearce himself reserved judgement, quoting Paul Jackson's claim that the BBC was definitely onto a winner but injecting a tone of scepticism, although not overt criticism, into his article

(February 7, 1982). Meanwhile the *Daily Mirror*, under the headline “Punk Shocker” and the sub-heading “A rude, crude team out to make mayhem”, informed its readers they were soon to witness “four outrageous young men” whose “humour makes *Not the Nine O’clock News* team look like Sunday school teachers... Their language is vulgar and their brand of comedy shocking” (August 28, 1982). A further *Mirror* preview warned “they’re a pretty shocking mob and their behaviour and their language is likely to upset older viewers” and went on to quote Rik Mayall, who asked why, if people use swear words in real life, they should not on television (November 9, 1982). The *Sun*, however, was confidently predicting a huge hit. TV critic Charlie Catchpole said he was “privileged” to watch a preview and predicted “the bold new series will make *Monty Python* and *Not the Nine O’clock News* look as tame as *Play School*” (August 28, 1982).

The Young Ones was the first sitcom aimed specifically at young people. Previously sitcoms had tried to win a family audience; hence the tendency in many shows to include characters from different generations so that all viewers could have someone with whom to identify, and the lack of too much in the way of sexual activity or bad language which could offend older people or be unsuitable for children. Broadly speaking, this new approach had the expected effect; young people found it much easier to ‘get’ the show than older people, and as a result hostile reviews by ‘old’ critics who didn’t ‘get it’ cut little ice with the writers and producer. It was the public reaction which interested them and, although ratings were only just over two million, the appreciation index among those who did watch was in the 60s and, according to Jackson, “the postbag was immediate and very heavy; the buzz started to go round, the boys started to be recognised in nightclubs, so it clearly got to its target audience” (Wilmot and Rosengard, 1989, p.106).

Once the show was aired, initial reviews were largely positive. The *Scotsman* decided that although it was vulgar “like babies sometimes are” and was full of bad jokes, “it is doing new things, treading on old toes, being inventive and full of life” (December 4, 1982). Many reviewers took this tone; they found it vulgar and rude, but couldn’t help liking it. Another *Scotsman* review described it as “Orton without the depth or the sharpness or the threat...funny, grotty and good.” (November 13, 1982). The *Financial Times* praised its willingness to question orthodoxies (November 17, 1982)

and *The Daily Mirror* urged Mrs Whitehouse to complain so that viewing figures would increase and a second series would be made, “which would be smashing” (December 11, 1982). Some publications attempted to deconstruct the show’s appeal. The *Sunday Times* magazine complained about the uneven quality, but concluded that *The Young Ones* was popular because its audience could identify with the student lifestyle being portrayed (November 29, 1982). Other reviewers recognised that older people were not likely to ‘get’ the show because it was aimed at younger people. Ray Connolly from the London *Evening Standard* watched the show with his children, who enjoyed it even though there were aspects of it they did not understand. The tampon joke, however, which had caused so much trouble during production, offended neither them nor him (December 8, 1982). Young people at this time were likely to have been readers of the then hugely popular *New Musical Express*, and its reviewer ‘X Moore’ gave it a rave review, indicating it was hitting the spot with its target audience. Moore credited it with finally bringing television comedy up to date and relevant, rather than “ten years behind”. He seems to have observed the dynamics of the show with more insight than many other reviewers, remarking that its “rut-ridden domestic rows turned comic dialectic” reflect the rawness always present in live comedy, if not in sitcom (December 4, 1982).

Some reviewers hated it, however. The *Mail on Sunday* questioned the comic value of one dead rat being eaten by another and accused the main characters of being “merely excuses to parade stereotypes ...with the weakest of humour and most revolting of surreal touches” (November 4, 1982). An episode of the television programme about television, *Did You See?*, neatly encapsulated this split in public opinion and illustrates that the show became a talking point from its first transmission. Host Ludovic Kennedy and guest football pundit Laurie McMenemy hated *The Young Ones*, while fellow guests anthropologist Desmond Morris and actress Julie Walters liked it (see *The Scotsman*, December 4, 1982). Television people could recognise a hit when they saw it, however. Mayall talks about going to a Channel 4 party just after the show started: “People kept coming up to me and telling me it was brilliant” (Ellen, 1984).

Whatever anyone else may have thought, the programme’s target audience, young people, seemed to identify very strongly with it. Mayall recalled that when he and Adrian Edmundson went on tour they would see dozens of “13-year-old Vyvyans”

(Dixon, 1984) and that “most of the reaction we get is mainly from schoolkids, and it’s always positive stuff” (Penman, 1984). The *New Musical Express* remarked on the tendency for young, usually male, fans to repeat “the motions and metros of last night’s highlights” (Penman, 1984).

By the time the second series was broadcast in 1984, press reviews were still polarised and familiarity with the show seems not to have dimmed its ability to delight and appal. The tone of the show was somewhat different. Some sections of the press noted the show had become rather more slapstick and juvenile. The *New Musical Express* said it seemed to be “deliberately fashioned for the fifth form” (Penman, 1984). In the article, Mayall admitted the writing had changed, with more gags and more slapstick and violence. Jackson, meanwhile, believes a greater knowledge of the rules of television meant the writers were somewhat less experimental; “And that seems to me to be only sensible – you try things out, and if some of them don’t work it seems strange to me to stick to the things that don’t” (Wilmot and Rosengard, 1989, p.160).

Audiences were still lapping it up: viewing figures rose to 5.7m, a very respectable figure for BBC2. More publicity from the BBC, including a *Radio Times* cover, probably helped, although Mayall claims this was unwanted (Penman, 1984).

However, press reaction was mixed. The *Daily Mail* was unimpressed, both with the show and other critics’ approval of it: “‘Gloriously anarchic’ it may be, according to *The Times*, but, except for a lively parody of *University Challenge* at the end, *The Young Ones* struck me as juvenile rubbish” (May 10, 1984). The *Sunday Telegraph*, perhaps understandably given the average age and income of that newspaper’s readership, was also unconvinced. “Watching the show is like watching the monkeys at the zoo: there is just the chance they might do something really original involving a passing arch-deacon, say, but mostly it’s the usual little habits from which you avert the children’s gaze” (May 20, 1984). But the *Western Mail* believed jokes about smelly socks and flatulence, which had appalled the *Daily Mail*, were “handled with such verve that (*The Young Ones*) is one of the few genuinely funny programmes currently on offer” (May 12, 1984). The *Observer* found it “pretty disgusting” but also “intermittently but extremely funny” (May 13, 1984), The *Daily Express* described it as “disgusting, revolting, vulgar, sick-making, coarse, hoarse, yukky, lewd, rude crude and I love it” (June 24, 1984) and the *Mail on Sunday* welcomed the return of “the

funniest series on television”, pointing out that the characters shouldn’t be taken too seriously and were, in any case, harmless “innocents in a hostile world” (13 May, 1984). The series was repeated in 1985, which resulted in an extremely hostile article in the *Daily Express*, headlined “Only cretins worship this cult” (March 21, 1985).

It seems likely that reviewers and people on television arts programmes spent more time analysing the programme than did the general public. There was a ‘buzz’ around the show and it did achieve cult status, but the people for whom it was not intended seem to have largely ignored it. There was no public backlash against the show, as there was with the ill-fated Chris Tarrant vehicle *OTT* (1982), a crude ‘adult’ version of anarchic children’s show *Tiswas* (1979-81), and only two letters about it were published in the *Radio Times* complaining about the picture of Rik, Vyvyan, Mike and Neil on the front. However, these letters were not written because the viewers found the show reprehensible but because they found the four too ugly. Meanwhile Mary Whitehouse kept her thoughts to herself and the show went on to win a BAFTA.

Themes and Representations

The Young Ones was formally innovative and helped the sitcom genre to escape its rigid formal definitions. But if we look beyond the form, instead focusing on gender representation and the portrayal of social and sexual identity and relationships, is the show really saying anything new?

The premise of the show is simple; four students share a house and get into various scrapes. But it is easy to understand why *The Young Ones* was seen as such a fascinating departure from what had gone before. Wild moments of fantasy suddenly occur, seemingly from nowhere; a giant sandwich might crash through the roof, or the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse might make an appearance. None of these events, however, are treated by the characters as out of the ordinary. Although unusual, the use of fantasy was not unheard of in sitcom; *The Rise and Fall of Reginald Perrin* made just a few years earlier also had fantastic moments and a wildly improbable plot. But it is true to say *The Young Ones* pushed this element further. The characters go beyond stereotypes to become grotesque parodies of social types, cartoon-like,

consequence-free violence is common and characters directly address the camera. The programme blurred genre boundaries in a way rarely seen since the earliest days of sitcom when George Burns and Gracie Allen would suddenly launch into a variety routine. Sketch and variety show elements, such as Alexi Sayle's monologues, short filmed inserts related to the plot in only the most tenuous manner, if at all, and performances by pop bands would suddenly interrupt the narrative. The music was largely inserted because the producer wanted the show classified as variety in order to get a bigger budget (*The History of Alternative Comedy, BBC*), but it still had a disorientating effect.

However *The Young Ones* also incorporated many traditional elements of the sitcom form, giving it much in common with the shows Jackson, Mayall *et al* professed to hate. The characters are trapped by their mutual need in claustrophobic surroundings and seem doomed never to escape; elements of the 'outside' generally represent a threat; comedy arises from the dialogue, the personalities of the characters, their reaction to the situation in which they find themselves and their interaction with each other; the status quo is disrupted in each episode, admittedly often to an extreme degree, but by the beginning of the next everything is back to normal, and the action appears to take place in an unspecified location at a time which is presumably intended to be 'now'.

Previous discussion of the show has focused on its formal anarchy. It is often cited as the start of an exciting new era in television comedy and its radical form is usually the aspect seized upon by cultural commentators and academics. Andy Medhurst, for example, talks about the way the show "detonated the representational protocols of the genre by introducing surrealism, animation, live music and excessive violence" (Medhurst, 2000). The programme can also be situated within the attempt to classify the 'realism' of sitcom. Steve Neale separates comedy into works of 'social' and 'formal' disruption, with, I would argue, *The Young Ones* an example of the latter. Terry Lovell splits sitcoms into 'social realism' and 'non-realistic' social comedies, arguing that most hover somewhere around the middle (Lovell, 1982, pp. 22-25). Many sitcoms made during the 1970s and early 1980s can be, and were, read as plausible representations of real life; *The Good Life* and *Butterflies* are both realistic in this way. But whereas a show such as *Are You Being Served?* with its improbable,

though still possible plots, would veer towards the 'non-realistic', *The Young Ones* swerves off into surrealism. Neale and Krutnick talk about *The Young Ones* as an "anti-sit-com" that deliberately ruptures sitcom's naturalistic conventions (Neale and Krutnick, 1990, p.245). Mike Clarke denies that the show is a sitcom at all because of its lack of commitment to realism (Clarke, 1987, p.106). Certainly *The Young Ones* is almost carnivalesque in the way its characters not only flout but utterly ignore normal rules of behaviour. Its employment of satire and parody was also unusual for sitcom at this time. But I would argue that attempting to determine the degree of its 'realism' is to misunderstand how the show imparts its message.

It is true that *The Young Ones* is marvellously fresh and inventive. But its anarchy is not meaningless. It echoes British comedies such as *The Goon Show* (1951-60) and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-74) and, in America, the sitcom *Green Acres* (1965-71), in its use of formal disruption to shake up audiences and force them to question societal mores by pointing out the illogicality underpinning many of these structures and beliefs. Mayall himself has explained that he was intending to provoke a reaction from audiences similar to that engendered by *The Goons* and *Python*: "It's that madness and excitement, the promise that anything can happen and the fulfilling of that promise" (Jackson, 1984). In this way *The Young Ones* is a rare example of a sitcom that directly acknowledges the "recognition of an intention" to make people laugh (Cook, 1982, p.14). The direct addresses to camera, formal anarchy and lack of realism make us complicit in creating the comedy. A fantastical element is built into the show to jolt the viewer into recognising the comedy in absurdity, and the sitcom form is stretched to breaking point.

But it would be a mistake to categorise *The Young Ones* as unrealistic by concentrating purely on its form. What the show is actually saying about these characters and their lives is *more* realistic than typical sitcoms rather than less. We can gain an understanding of how 'real' these characters are by looking closely at their sexual identity, behaviour and language. *The Young Ones* was unusual in that it was written by, and aimed at, young people. Behind its anarchic form lie truths about young sexuality with which most sitcoms had previously failed to engage. Some journalists have picked up on this. Hugo Davenport in *The Guardian* has written that *The Young Ones* was the first time a sitcom had ever actually had "something to do

with real life. Mine, even” (Davenport, 1996). Writing in 1985, Ian Hislop noted that, instead of the typical sitcom punks and hippies, the characters of *The Young Ones* were “so extreme as to be, in fact, completely individual” (Hislop, 1985).

It is easy to overlook the thematic and representational complexity of *The Young Ones*; it is often described as overtly crude and any sexual content it may have is usually dismissed in these terms. In fact *The Young Ones*’ treatment of sexual themes is surprisingly coherent in such a formally anarchic show. Similarly Mike, Rik, Neil and Vyvyan can be dismissed as extreme stereotypes. In many ways this is justified because the characters are intended to be extreme examples of social types rather than multi-faceted human beings. Mike is a strange creature; he was originally supposed to be a sort of ‘Mr Cool’ character but casting problems meant he comes across as not fully conceived. Vyvyan and Neil, however, are almost cartoon versions of an ultra-masculine punk/skinhead and a woolly hippy respectively, while Rik is half petulant teenager and half the sort of unreconstructed male hidden behind a veneer of right-on ideology society throws up from time-to-time. But subtly-drawn characters would have floundered in the loose-flowing and often anarchic form and plot, whereas the types created are themselves so over-the-top they enable the anarchy. Medhurst and Tucks’ observation that extreme stereotypes can “make us examine the whole process of stereotyping itself” is relevant here (Medhurst and Tuck, 1982, p.48). They reject this reading of the sitcom *Agony* (1979-81), but I believe it is true of *The Young Ones*. The characters are such extreme stereotypes, we are forced to engage with them on that level. In doing so we gain insight into how stereotyping works.

The extreme nature of these stereotypes draws attention to the more insidious portrayals of youth ‘types’ in other sitcoms. In *Butterflies*, young people are portrayed as sexually active and sexually confident: they are the people having sex, much to the envy and disgust of their elders. They provide a model of unrepressed sexuality against which we and the other characters can measure our own sexual hang-ups and inadequacies. *The Young Ones*, written by people themselves fresh out of university, gives us a different view of youthful sexuality. Neil, Rik, Vyvyan and Mike are full of raging hormones, spots, delusional self-obsession, frustration and unfocused anger. They are clearly not getting much sex, appear threatened by it and, in fact, are probably virgins. In this way *The Young Ones* spoke more honestly and

directly to contemporary young people about their own experiences and behaviour. Rik Mayall said he wanted to create four young people who share the traits and characteristics of real young people, albeit in an exaggerated way (Jackson, 1984). Although the four main characters are clearly types, in some ways they more closely resemble real teenagers, and are subsequently easier to relate to, than Adam and Russell, the sexual gymnasts of *Butterflies*.

Television, especially youth TV and sitcoms, and the tendency to reduce people to types is a target of the show - the short sitcom parody 'Oh Crikey' in the episode 'Boring' illustrates this – but it was not a core target. Neither were the four main characters intended to be admirable role models. The writers' stated objectives were to satirise the cult of youth. They do this by presenting us with the reality, not the fantasy, of what young people are like. The show parodies the tendency of young people to construct their identity from whatever half-baked opinions and fads are in fashion at the time and to state their individuality by aligning themselves with others (hippies, punks, etc.) This satiric examination of youth in *The Young Ones* gives us an insight into how the writers perceived young people's attitudes towards sex and illustrates how sexual fear and repression underpins much of the characters' interaction.

Critical concern about the supposedly shocking nature of the programme is in many ways a red herring, as a study of the language used by the characters reveals. Many critics focused on the show's 'bad' language which would lead a viewer to expect a large degree of sexual explicitness. But it is wrong to claim the characters constantly spew forth a stream of obscene words. A content analysis of the language of one episode chosen at random, 'Bomb', supports this. This episode contains three uses of the word 'bastard' and one 'git'. The four main characters use a great deal of scatological language such as 'bum' and 'poo', and Rik tries very hard to swear because he thinks it is cool, but rarely manages to do it properly; he calls the others "lavatory bowls" at one point. In 'Boring' Vyvyan is challenged to swear, but can only come up with 'big jobs'. Paul Jackson makes the point that if the show's language seems unnecessarily scatological and the performances somewhat over-the-top this is because young people, its intended audience, are not known for their calm,

restraint or sophistication (Jackson, 1991). But on the whole really bad language is used sparingly and sexually explicit language is not used at all.

Where stronger words are used, it is not by the four lead characters. Rather there is a tendency in *The Young Ones* for the worst swearwords to be used by other characters intended to represent the 'normal', outside world. In 'Bomb' a little girl uses the word 'crap'. In contrast the four students come across as innocent; they are pleased with their daring when they use very mild words, as children are. Paul Jackson was perfectly well aware that bad language needs to be used carefully in television because it is what audiences have traditionally found least acceptable. In 1991 he said it was "rarely the intention of programme makers, gratuitously, to shock an audience for its own sake; to stir them up, yes; to indicate strength of feeling in characters or in real life situations, yes, but just simply to offend them, why? So they can turn your programme off?" He goes on to argue that swear words simply do not have the power they once had, so to get into a major editorial row over one is rarely worth it (Jackson, 1991). The use of bad or suggestive language as a way of livening up dull writing is satirised in 'Bomb'. Neil, when he finds out the television licence detector man knows fully well the household has a television, says; "So you've just been playing with me all along." "Well," the licence detector man replies, "It's better than playing with yourself. Ho, ho, a cheap sexual allusion makes the world go round."

But although sexually explicit language is rarely used by the four main characters, sex is nevertheless a constant undercurrent in their lives and a frequent topic of conversation. This is a trait *The Young Ones* shares with many other sitcoms. But it is not something *The Young Ones'* four main characters ever actually do. Mike likes to present himself as something of a ladykiller and it seems important to him to appear this way in order to retain his 'cool' persona. He has a controlling, cynical personality and verbal traits, is unwilling to expose any vulnerabilities and demands to be accepted as an island of relative normality in a sea of eccentrics. However he is exposed as a young man desperately trying to present an image he cannot quite live up to. As is often the case in sitcom, sex is a battlefield and the man is the loser. In 'Demolition' Mike's efforts to seduce the somewhat frumpy local council official get nowhere and in 'Oil' he resorts to throwing knickers around his bedroom, inflating a blow-up doll and putting on an audiotape of sex noises. Meanwhile the eccentricities

of the other characters in *The Young Ones* doom them to a strangely asexual existence punctuated by almost palpable frustration. Neil, Vyvyan and Rik never get so much as a sniff of a woman. Neil seems to have given up completely and has retreated into himself. Vyvyan, despite performing energetic push-ups to attract the women at a party, never really seems to expect sex and channels his energies into destructive violence. Rik, meanwhile, despite his veneer of right-on, anti-sexist politics, seems terrified of women and frequently refers to them as “slags” and “old bags”. (The writers make it clear in this way that they were aware that political correctness does not necessarily lead to progressive views.)

The Young Ones was actually written by young people, unlike most 1970s sitcoms, which may account for its insights into the young male adult’s ambivalence towards women and sex. The fact that one of the writers was a woman is also relevant. A woman writer is more likely to see beyond male posturing and sense hidden hostilities towards women. This posturing makes it unlikely that these characters will admit to their sexual frustration, but it is reflected in the *mise-en-scene*. These characters live in chaotic squalor representing the confusion and unfocused anger they feel. The house is permanently untidy and dirty and parts of it are frequently demolished by Vyvyan.

Thus *The Young Ones* combines a recognition of male insecurities surrounding sex with a total denial of these fears by the characters themselves. This approach gives an interesting insight into contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality. The writers openly acknowledge that, even 15 years after the legalisation of homosexuality, ‘right-on’ young people probably found gayness more difficult to accept than they would care to admit. In *The Young Ones* the characters’ attitude towards homosexuals probably accurately reflected the continuing suspicion and hostility gay people had to endure at this time: “For one man to love another is not poofy, Vyvyan, it is actually rather beautiful. It’s only when they start touching each others’ bottoms it starts getting poofy,” Rik asserts in *Flood*. However it is clear that, as with every other statement Rik makes, the authors intend us to find this point of view ridiculous. The writers warn us that political correctness should not be confused with a genuine respect for diversity, especially in an area which provokes such deep seated feelings of fear and shame in the male psyche.

As well as their interaction with the opposite sex, these characters' relationships with each other are also of interest. This interest lies not in any sexual desire they may feel for each other – I can find no evidence of a gay subtext, although Vyvyan's overt masculinity and tendency to call everyone a 'poof' could be construed as suspicious – but because their relationship is familial. Alternative comedians may have shunned sexism but the four main characters have very recognisable gender traits. Rik Mayall has said that the four could be seen as a family, with Mike the father, Neil the mother, Rik the daughter and Vyvyan the son. This description of the four as a family is borne out by a careful look at these characters' different personalities and behaviour. Mike and Vyvyan have traits that could be described as 'male' – emotional detachment and violence respectively – while Rik's petulance and Neil's gentle nurturing could be described as feminine, although clearly labels like this are problematic because they too pander to gender stereotypes. Vyvyan and Rik also squabble with each other in a very childlike way while the permanently depressed Neil has the martyred air of an unappreciated mother. Mike-as-father is seen leading his family from one ridiculous situation to another, believing himself to be the only one capable of taking charge but in actual fact achieving little. For example, when it appears the world has sunk under water Mike's response to the immediate panic about lack of food is to kill Neil. In another episode when the television detector van arrives he orders Vyvyan to "eat the telly" (which he does). Sitcom fathers are often portrayed as natural leaders who nonetheless lack the common sense of the mother in domestic situations – Terry and June Medford are an obvious example. Nevertheless, the man is always ultimately deferred to, and his bumbling nature is merely an amusing trait rather than a real indication of weakness. However, *The Young Ones* succeeds in challenging the traditional view of fatherhood, exposing the fact that believing oneself to be a leader and actually having leadership qualities are not the same thing.

Similarly the portrayal of Neil is of particular interest because of the way it subverts the traditional sitcom portrayal of the mother. Neil is shamelessly exploited, then criticised, and his efforts for his 'family' taken entirely for granted. Like Ria in *Butterflies*, Neil is lumbered with the role of housewife – a job he does not actually want but which nevertheless consumes his life. He is frequently seen attempting to cook, but *The Young Ones'* filthy, bare kitchen is a parody of the kitchens that form

the heart of many domestic comedies. It is clear the other characters openly despise Neil for his compliance to their demands. Ria's family might have found her food inedible, but they attempted to eat it nonetheless in order to spare her feelings. Neil is not so lucky and his food, usually lentils, frequently ends up on the floor or wall. No other show would dare suggest the mother is despised, although previous male-authored sitcoms frequently portrayed women as leeches or placid stooges of their husbands. It was not until Carla Lane wrote *Butterflies* that sitcom explored the dichotomy of housewives being both the heart of the family and its servant.

In 'Flood' a diatribe towards Neil from the other characters about their lack of breakfast is immediately followed by a short sketch featuring a cat. The cat, which is clearly intended to represent an 'old school' stand-up comedian, is yanked off the stage as it starts to tell a joke about its wife's terrible cooking. This illustrates how aware the writers were that comedy about useless wives was ripe for parody. *The Young Ones'* radicalism comes not from the fact that it ignores the domestic issues which form the basis of so many sitcoms which preceded it, but from the fact that it questions the roles of different members of a family and presents their petty power squabbles as childish and ridiculous. Much domestic comedy of the 1970s presented these aspects of family life as the norm to which we should all aspire. The writers' make their attitude towards typical, unrealistic representations of family life clear in 'Bomb' when the family on the front of the cornflakes box starts squabbling. The father, who announces he is gay, tells them to "shut up and keep smiling – we're supposed to be the ideal nuclear family."

Conclusion

The Young Ones was created by a young producer and writers who were new to television, and its form, style and tone were very different from the typical sitcoms of the time. That it got made at all was probably the result of the challenge set by Channel Four. The new channel's stated aim of attracting young viewers meant the BBC felt compelled to compete on these terms and it was consequently open to radical new ideas. The positive response from the press, which recognised fresh new talent, and from members of the young audience, who finally felt a comedy was

speaking directly to them about their lives, encouraged the BBC to experiment further with this new breed of writers and performers.

Thematically, *The Young Ones* has many similarities to other, more formally conservative, sitcoms. In particular it shares an underlying preoccupation with the sexual identity and desires of its characters. For these four students, as with many sitcom characters, sex is both a frightening mystery and a source of tension, and the fear it creates is something that is best hidden under layers of manufactured persona. Young men are expected to conform to accepted models of masculinity and a failure to conform is a source of shame. Men and women may have a mutual need, but they regard each other with misunderstanding and a great deal of apprehension. The most frightening kind of sex of all, gay sex, is treated with varying degrees of ridicule. The sexuality of these characters is rendered non-threatening and they do not actually have sex. In this way the show fulfils the traditional role of situation comedy; identifying, exploring and safely releasing sexual tensions.

But where *The Young Ones* differs is in the ability of the writers, and subsequently the audiences, to regard these traits with a certain degree of detachment and insight. We can keep our ironic distance from these characters and question their beliefs and behaviour – not just accept them as ‘normal’. The show also succeeds in capturing the reality of young people’s lives - their sexual frustrations, their search for identity and the negative aspects of family life. Accepted representations of women and men and mothers and fathers are consciously questioned, as are the gender roles they traditionally play.

In this way the show presents us with a genuinely fresh and questioning approach. The BBC created the space in which new, young voices could be heard and the audiences responded accordingly. Sitcom in the 1980s may have more closely resembled *Terry and June* than *The Young Ones*, but a Pandora’s Box had been opened. The show proved that audiences would accept a sitcom that was non-realist, full of unsympathetic characters and excruciatingly honest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

The relationship between the BBC, its creative staff, the programmes they made and the people who watched them during this period was a complex one, but it is one that it is vital to appreciate in its totality if we are to understand fully how and why sitcoms were made. This was a circular relationship and each partner had an input into the creative process. Consequently an holistic approach is necessary if any real insight is to be gained.

The unique nature of the BBC inevitably shapes research into the programmes it makes. When considering the output of the BBC, it is those genres usually defined as ‘popular’, such as sitcom, that present the most problems because of the apparent paradox of a high-minded public service broadcaster making mass-market light entertainment. The corporation had always possessed a strong moral code laid down by its first director general, Lord Reith, and, in terms of sexuality, this code tended to coincide with the dominant morality of the day (for instance, in 1929, its chief engineer, Peter Eckersley lost his job because he was the guilty party in divorce proceedings). But Reith had also enshrined the notion that, although largely in tune with the establishment and its values, and dependent on the government for its charter, the BBC was also fundamentally independent in nature. This independence reached new heights in the 1960s under director general Hugh Greene, whose strong belief in freedom of thought and speech led to greater freedom for writers to examine established sexual, social and political norms with more honesty.

The liberal ethos of the corporation ensured that, whenever possible, executives avoided stifling creativity. The BBC’s freedom from the constraints imposed by advertisers allowed it to nurture creative staff to a greater extent than commercial broadcasters could. It also had the benefit of two television channels; BBC One, which concentrated on general-interest, family-orientated programming, and BBC Two, which served smaller, more specialist audiences and which was able to launch

more controversial shows. These shows could always move to BBC1 if they appealed to mass audiences.

But the BBC was shaped as much by its middlebrow nature as by its liberalism. This led to an embracing of narrative forms that executives believed appealed to the middle ground, resulting in sitcoms that tended to conform to a handful of accepted comic styles. BBC sitcom tended towards the 'drawing room' style that examines bourgeois sensibilities in a light, easily-digested way; *The Good Life* is an example of this. Although this was the dominant form, more 'vulgar' comedy could be considered acceptable because of the long tradition in Britain of music hall as mass public entertainment. *Are You Being Served?* was very much from this tradition. A strong vein of surrealism is also detectable in British comedy, and it is this that directly influenced *The Young Ones*. These strands of comedy, all distinct but accepted as equally valid examples of 'British' comedy by audiences, tended to attract actors who specialised in one or the other. Their knowledge and skill in their chosen field added greatly to the shows' coherence.

A strong BBC culture of professionalism was also crucial. Many producers were more loyal to their own professional code than to the corporation itself. Ironically, rather than undermining the BBC, this benefited the corporation because producers prided themselves on having a greater knowledge of their audiences than did their superiors. Thus, they followed their instincts and avoided controls whenever possible. In this way, light entertainment producers such as Dennis Main Wilson, Gareth Gwenlan, Sidney Lotterby and Duncan Wood moved the sitcom genre forward by enabling the creation of such series as *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Butterflies*. These shows contained radical elements of content or style and were made despite original doubts about the suitability of the material for comedy. This ability of producers to ensure that original scripts made it onto the screen with a minimum of interference made it possible for writers to speak directly to the imaginations of their audience. They were able to involve audience members in the moral dilemmas of their characters and engage them in a dialogue. Writers at the BBC were treated as artists, not hacks, and as a result the corporation made programmes with a consistent, coherent creative vision.

Thus the BBC can be seen as an oasis of creativity in an industry in which television programmes can easily become just another commercial product. However, comedy was not like drama; it was not seen by BBC executives as at the cutting edge of creativity and art, but as a means of attracting mass audiences. The need to produce programmes that were economically viable, fitted the established generic form and were successful in terms of ratings inevitably led to a narrowing of the voices that could be heard. New writers found it difficult to get work because producers who needed to fill sitcom slots usually turned to established writers with a proven track record and finely honed professional skills. The BBC had no ideological agenda for silencing new voices; producers and light entertainment executives argued that 'funny', not ideological viewpoint, was the criteria for making a programme. Furthermore, new writers could break through; Carla Lane succeeded in looking at domestic life from a female point of view. But, having apparently found a winning formula with its sitcom, there was little incentive within the BBC for innovation. Furthermore, most producers and executives were male and middle class and tended to respond to work which fitted that sensibility. And, because they prided themselves on 'knowing' their audience, they believed what they enjoyed and understood would be similarly well-received by viewers.

It generally took a major challenge from outside to force the Light Entertainment Department to recognise the need for change and the audience and its perceived needs were a vital part of this process. The launch of ITV stimulated the creation of the BBC Light Entertainment Department and its subsequent style and structure. Part of the paradoxical nature of the corporation has always been the need to retain its high-minded qualities or risk being considered unworthy of public money in a culture that already has popular programming provided by market forces. On the other hand, if it were to provide no popular programming at all, why would ordinary people who rely on their televisions for entertainment continue to pay for an 'elitist' service they never watch? The BBC needed to create a light entertainment department that had the ability to tap the public mood and create sitcoms that appealed to mass audiences, while retaining aspects such as skilful acting, a literary aspect to the writing and smooth production that marked them out as 'quality' programmes. In this context even a lowbrow sitcom such as *Are You Being Served?* could be seen in positive qualitative terms.

When ITV was launched the challenge was to come up with popular programming that appealed to a mass audience. But when Channel Four began broadcasting in 1982, the BBC was forced to start thinking in terms of niches and members of the audience that had not been adequately catered for before. This enabled new voices to be heard - *The Young Ones* was a genuinely fresh perspective on young people.

But these occasional shifts did not affect all sitcoms. Instead just one or two edgier programmes would be shown, probably on BBC2, while the vast majority of sitcom output continued to be aimed at mass audiences. Neither did contemporary audiences see anything wrong with these mainstream shows. One of the functions of sitcoms is to engage in a dialogue with the audience about the boundaries of normality and difference and in these sitcoms the public perception of normality and that of the programme makers largely coincided.

However, a clear ideological shift is perceptible by examining these four sitcoms. The best way to explore this shift and assess how the various internal and external factors impacted upon content is to analyse individual texts closely and consider them as bearers of meaning in their own right. In this way we can see how the similarities and differences in the production process and the ongoing struggle to meet the perceived needs of the audience resulted in similarities and differences in the way sitcoms engaged with issues surrounding sexual morality and identity.

When considering these texts, however, it is important not to confuse radical form with radical content. When considering the use of stereotypes in sitcom, Neale's view that stereotypical characters should be considered within texts rather than across them is correct. For example, the ideological impact of the 'blonde bimbo' character can vary greatly in individual sitcoms. Unexpected similarities in the portrayal of sexual behaviour, identity and relationships can appear across texts if we put aside differences in authorial style and the surface aspects of representation.

The same five themes occur in all four sitcoms. These are; sexual frustration, the dangerous nature of sexual desire, the acceptable limits of sexual behaviour and identity, the benefits and drawbacks of marriage and the importance of love.

All four shows present sexual desire as a strange, unpredictable force that engenders both pleasure and fear. Desire free from feelings of inadequacy, guilt and disgust is rare. Only Tom and Barbara in *The Good Life*, and teenagers Adam and Russell in *Butterflies*, seem to really enjoy sex in an uncomplicated manner. Sexual frustration, meanwhile, is endemic and features in all four shows. Male sexual frustration is particularly prevalent – this is perhaps unsurprising given that most sitcoms were written by men. A comparison between *Are You Being Served?* and *The Young Ones* illustrates the lasting hold this theme had on sitcom, but it is also essential to recognise the greater honesty with which it is acknowledged in the later show. The male staff members at Grace Brothers are all dysfunctional and frustrated to a certain degree, and the same is true in *The Young Ones*. Both explore the tension between the need to have a great deal of sex in order to be a ‘real man’ and the reality of the situation. Strong parallels are revealed by a comparison between Mike in *The Young Ones* and Mr Lucas in *Are You Being Served?* In both cases there is a huge gap between the image they project of themselves as sexually experienced, desirable people and the reality of their lives. Both are sexually frustrated and their constant references to sex and their tendency to boast about their prowess are hollow. Just as Mr Lucas constantly tries, and fails, to get Miss Brahms into bed, so Mike is the loser in what is still presented as a sexual battle. His efforts at seduction get him nowhere.

In both shows the male characters treat women as an enemy that needs to be conquered. Although sex is a constant undercurrent and a frequent topic of conversation in both, in neither is it an activity the sexually frustrated characters actually perform. Although male sexual desire is seen as a powerful force, it is continuously thwarted by female unwillingness and the characters’ own inadequacies. Women are creatures who think and behave in baffling ways and who engender vague feelings of resentment and hostility. In *Are You Being Served?* this unspoken hostility between the sexes is presented as an undeniable and natural truth. But in *The Young Ones* there is a vast distance between what the characters think of themselves and the way the audience is encouraged to perceive them. Subsequently their hostility is exposed as being as ridiculous as many of their other beliefs. Mr Lucas’ relentless pursuit of women as possible sexual conquests is the ‘normal’ way for young men to behave. When Mike does the same we can see that his quest is ultimately futile and hollow.

The portrayal of female sexuality differs greatly across the four shows, reflecting the different authorial and production factors at play, changing perceptions of women through time and the different relationships these shows had with their audience. Perhaps the most fertile comparison is between Mrs Slocombe in *Are You Being Served?*, Margo in *The Good Life* and Ria in *Butterflies*. Mrs Slocombe is a battleaxe, which in this case means she is sexually unattractive and therefore invisible to the male gaze. Her lack of sexual allure makes her a non-person in this respect; we are never encouraged to take her seriously in any way. She exists almost as a warning to women not to get too uppity or to let themselves get old or fat. Margo is also a battleaxe-type figure, in the sense that she is older, physically imposing rather than 'sexy' and very bossy, especially where men of an equal or lower social status are concerned. But in some ways she is also one of the most startlingly original figures in British sitcom. She is a battleaxe who retains a sexual allure, and the audience response to her is correspondingly more complex. This fresh approach to a female character was probably greatly enhanced by the skill of the actress and her suitability for the role. When Margo barks an order it has the ability to create a frisson of sexual excitement rather than just a stab of resentment or disgust. But it took a female writer to really take the portrayal of a female character up to the next level of depth and complexity.

A constant undercurrent of sex is discernable in *Are You Being Served?* and *The Good Life*, but it is sex from a male point of view. The women conform, or fail to conform, to male notions of female desirability and acceptable female behaviour. But in *Butterflies* the protagonist is a woman, the show is written from a female perspective and female discourses surrounding love, romance and emotional intimacy are present. Ria's complex sexuality and her identity as a woman and as a person are at the heart of the show. She is not just a female object upon whom men can project their own notions of femininity. Feminist arguments about whether Ria's approach to her own life is desirable or acceptable are beside the point. The writer was free to explore her own ideas about what it is to be a female, and audience research showed that it was a sensibility with which contemporary female viewers identified and to which they responded. Ria defines herself by her relationship with men, but that state of mind was still a reality for many women. She wants the attention that a lover would give her, but she really yearns for that attention from her husband. She and her 'lover'

Leonard never have sex, leaving us to conclude that, in women, the need for an emotional connection is stronger even than the sexual impulse.

The portrayal of marriage and the relationship between the sexes also differs dramatically in each show. Again we can see that by approaching the subject matter from new angles the writers were able to increase the complexity of the material. The hostility of men towards women, inherent in *Are You Being Served?*, is satirised in *The Young Ones*. Similarly, all four shows contain revealing discourses about the nature, and desirability, of marriage. The men in *Are You Being Served?* feel trapped in their marriages and are openly critical of their wives. The implication is that women use their sexual allure to fool men into marrying them and then let themselves go to seed, resulting in male frustration and revulsion. Only young women are sexually desirable, and Mrs Slocombe's sexual and social isolation warn that a woman's best chance of happiness is to get herself a husband while she is still young and 'sexy'. *The Good Life* presents marriage as a positive institution; a mutually-supportive, symbiotic union. But it is also clear that marriage is a state in which men have the financial power and so ultimately the control and freedom lacked by their wives. Nevertheless, Jerry and Tom appreciate the contribution their wives make to their lives and their desire for a quiet life causes them to indulge women in the misguided belief they are in some way 'better' than their infantilised menfolk. Barbara appears an equal partner in the marriage but Tom makes all the decisions. Margo has delusions of social status, but the show exposes status and possessions as meaningless.

By the time *Butterflies* was made, the radical notion that women could feel trapped by marriage was able to be explored. It is clear that Ria's emotional needs are not met by her husband, and her lack of any real economic or social power traps her in a "brick prison". But it was *The Young Ones* that presented the most unflinching portrayal of a marriage, if we accept the notion of the four students of *The Young Ones* as a family unit. The man is a deluded bully and the woman a despised, put-upon slave; a truly radical concept for a sitcom to explore.

The manner in which sitcoms deal with sexual identity and orientation is crucial to how they create notions of otherness and define the boundaries of deviance. When

homosexuality was legalised in 1967, people were forced to accept that a practice they had always been told was wrong was suddenly permissible. However, legalising a practice people had been brought up to believe was wrong was problematic because immediate widespread social acceptance of homosexuality was unlikely. *Are You Being Served?* is trapped in this rather hazy moral climate. The programme refused to directly acknowledge homosexuality, but it is obviously a major preoccupation. Through the character of Mr Humphries the threat posed by homosexuality is diffused and deviance contained. He is clearly gay, but, rather than celebrating or condemning this difference, it is not mentioned. He is presented as harmless and faintly ridiculous and his sexual orientation is never directly acknowledged. This means he cannot incorporate it as a positive part of his identity, even though it tends to be how he is defined by the audience. He is, however, seemingly happy and guilt-free, which was a development of sorts in the portrayal of homosexuals on television and in film.

The Good Life and *Butterflies* present us with marriage and youthful heterosexual sex as the norm, and homosexuality is not an issue. *The Young Ones*, however, acknowledged the strong grip that homophobia still had on the male psyche and the limited effectiveness of political correctness in overcoming the deep fear and dread that thoughts of homosexuality seem to engender. Again the ironic distance between the writers and the characters encouraged the audience to recognise from what these characters said that their states of mind were not necessarily 'normal' and 'healthy'.

But ultimately, *The Young Ones*' most radical departure from previous sitcoms is its rejection of notions of the redemptive power of love. Sex often confuses and divides, but love between work colleagues, neighbours and married partners can glue people together. However ideologically suspect a contemporary viewer may consider *Are You Being Served?*, an element of warmth between the characters, and between the characters and the audience, is still discernible. *The Good Life* is all about love; love between married partners and between friends. The unspoken message is that the power of this love can overcome any obstacle and that nurturing it, especially in a marriage, is the way to find fulfilment. In *Butterflies*, Ria's love for her family traps her, but it is also the centre of her life and helps to form her identity. It is her struggle to express this love and discover its true potential that shapes the narrative. On the other hand, the four students in *The Young Ones* seem to stay together through

nothing more than inertia. Their hostility, and often physical violence, towards each other seems to hide no affection, and families are presented as little more than an artificial jamming together of disparate, and mutually incompatible, forces.

Thus these four shows illustrate a clear developmental leap. Sitcom traditionally allows writers and viewers to collude in an exploration of societal tensions. At a time of a disorienting shift in moral beliefs, this exploration tended to be safe and reassuring. The old-fashioned world of *Are You Being Served?* can be seen as a portrayal of a residual culture. The rapid societal changes of the 1960s and 1970s were largely ignored and the “mothers-in-law and kippers” humour so prevalent in traditional music-hall was still at the heart of the comedy. The portrayal of both women and gay people was accepted in an entirely uncomplicated way by the majority of the audience. Women’s liberation and gay rights were a fact of life, but the show’s traditional representation of these groups was familiar and comforting to many.

The dominant culture of the time was enshrined in *The Good Life*. Women and men are ostensibly equal, but financial power is the preserve of men. Women are rewarded for their compliance in this with material possessions, the love of their husbands and an acknowledgement that they often possess the “common sense” in the partnership. Sex, although natural and desirable, is really only acceptable and capable of engendering happiness within marriage.

However, *Butterflies* and *The Young Ones* illustrate that sitcom can be a valid site for oppositional and alternative explorations of society. The positive reaction by women to *Butterflies*, or by young people to *The Young Ones*, suggests that although audiences liked funny, well-crafted shows such as *The Good Life*, they were able to spot a more realistic, complex portrayal of themselves and their lives and responded accordingly. Public feedback about *Butterflies* suggests it spoke more clearly and directly to women and their lives than was the case with previous sitcoms. It articulated an emergent culture of a female struggle for identity and self-determination. The show is also an example of how the audience, as well as the writer, functioned as creators of meaning. They deepened the character of Ria by turning her from an unhappy housewife into the personification of female frustration.

The Young Ones, meanwhile, uses anarchy and nonsense to give a truly original and fresh perspective on youthful sensibilities and the more problematic aspects of family life.

Thus the BBC, which valued freedom, professionalism and integrity, opened up a space within which writers could pursue their own artistic visions and explore the society in which they lived. But it was also an organisation with a resolutely middle-brow agenda and narrow definitions of what was suitable for mass audiences. This, combined with the day-to-day pressures of competing in the broadcasting marketplace, and the need to continually justify the licence fee, tended to narrow the range of voices heard. Innovation was possible, however, and was often sparked by the outstanding talent and confidence of certain producers, such as Dennis Main Wilson or Paul Jackson, or by pressures from outside such as the launch of Channel Four. At the heart of these changes, however, was a continuing desire to engage with audiences.

Television shows do not spring fully formed onto the screen from the minds of their writers - there are mediating factors, which have to be taken into account when attempting to establish what these shows can actually tell us about the society with which they are attempting to engage. This is why a multifaceted approach such as this offers a useful example of how a wide variety of sources and approaches to the material can provide future studies of television history with a greater degree of width and depth. Television history can easily feed on itself so that entrenched beliefs and events are not questioned. A fresh look at primary source material can prevent this happening. Similarly looking at work from other relevant areas of television studies and applying it to a piece of historical research can help keep the subject fresh, if the writer can avoid collapsing under the weight of his or her source material.

The writer is the author of a show, but the text is also shaped by the organisation within which it is made. This is why studies of a television programme need to take into account the organisational structure and ethos surrounding its creation. It is also imperative that the meaning-producing role of the audience is not overlooked.

Audience research tends to be carried out on contemporary shows and genres, for obvious reasons, but this does not mean historical approaches should ignore it. It is

possible to establish contemporary audience opinions through a thorough examination of primary sources. Writers and producers are reluctant to attach any meaning to their creations at all, preferring to concentrate purely on their comic value. The meaning only crystallises when the show is broadcast and the discourse on the screen interacts with the imagination and experiences of the audience. Audience reaction subsequently flows back to programme makers and the BBC itself, affecting the future development of the genre. These four shows illustrate this process in action. They show how a popular genre can occupy an important ideological space within British television and the vital role the BBC fulfilled at this time in creating and mediating that space. Depending on the style of the individual writers and the perceived needs of the audience, sitcoms can concur with dominant thinking, explore alternatives or retreat into an idealised past.

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TVWPR – Television Weekly Programme Review Board minutes

AR reports – Audience Research reports

RCONT files – Radio Contributor files

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“Bomb”, 30 November, 1982.

“Flood”, 14 December, 1982.

“Sick”, 12 June, 1984.

Appendix I

Writers' Filmographies

David Croft (as writer)

The Eggheads (1961) with Richard Waring, John Law, Brad Ashton
Dad's Army (1968) With Jimmy Perry
Are You Being Served? (1972) With Jeremy Lloyd
It Ain't Half Hot Mum (1974) With Jimmy Perry
Come Back Mrs Noah (1977) With Jeremy Lloyd
Hi-de-Hi (1980) With Jimmy Perry
Oh Happy Band! (1980) – With Jeremy Lloyd
'Allo 'Allo (1982) With Jeremy Lloyd
You Rang, M'Lord (1988) With Jimmy Perry
Grace and Favour (1992 – 92) With Jeremy Lloyd
Which Way to the War (pilot only) (1994) – with Jeremy Lloyd
Oh, Dr Beeching (1996) With Richard Spendlove

John Esmonde and Bob Larbey

The Dick Emery Show (1956)
Room At The Bottom (1966)
Please Sir (1968)
The Fenn Street Gang (1971)
Cosmo And Thingy (1972)
Bowler (1973)
Football Crazy (1974)
Get Some In! (1975)
The Good Life (1975)
The Other One (1977)
Three Piece Suite (1977)
Feet First (1979)
Just Liz (1980)
A Fine Romance (1981) - Larbey only
Don't Rock The Boat (1982)
The Curious Case Of Santa Claus (1982) - Larbey only
Now And Then (1983)
Ever Decreasing Circles (1984)
Brush Strokes (1986)
Double First (1988)

On The Up (1990) - Larbey only
Hope It Rains (1991)
Mulberry (1992)
As Time Goes By (1992) - Larbey only
Down To Earth (1995)
My Good Friend (1995) - Larbey only

Carla Lane

The Liver Birds (1969) (with Myra Taylor)
Bless This House (1971) (with Myra Taylor and others)
No Strings (1974)
Going, Going, Gone... Free? (1975)
Three Piece Suite (1977)
Butterflies (1978)
The Last Song (1981)
Solo (1981)
Leaving (1984)
The Mistress (1985)
I Woke Up One Morning (1985)
Bread (1986)
Luv (1993)
Searching (1995)
The Liver Birds (1996)
Butterflies (2000) (Comic Relief special)

Rik Mayall (as writer)

Boom Boom, Out Go the Lights (1981) with Adrian Edmundson
Kevin Turvey Investigates (1981)
A Kick Up the Eighties (1981)
Kevin Turvey: The Man Behind the Green Door (1982)
The Comic Strip Presents (1982) (episodes "Dirty Movie", "A Fistful of Travellers' Cheques", "Mr. Jolly Lives Next Door")
The Young Ones (1982) (with Lise Mayer, Ben Elton)
Saturday Live (1986) (with Adrian Edmundson)
Dangerous Brothers Present: World of Danger (1986) (with Adrian Edmundson)
Filthy Rich & Catflap (1987) (occasional co-writer with Ben Elton)
Bottom (1991) with Adrian Edmundson

Lise Mayer

The Young Ones (1982) (with Rik Mayall, Ben Elton)
The Fast Show (1994) (one of many writers)

Ben Elton (as writer)

Alfresco (1983) (head writer)
The Young Ones (1982) (with Rik Mayall, Lise Mayer)
Spitting Image (1984) (one of many writers)
Happy Families (1985)
Saturday Live (1986)
Blackadder II (1986) (with Richard Curtis)
Lenny Henry Tonight (1986) (with Dick Clement and others)
Blackadder the Third (1987) (with Richard Curtis)
Friday Night Live (1988) (one of several writers)
Blackadder's Christmas Carol (1988) (with Richard Curtis)
Filthy Rich & Catflap (1987)
Blackadder: The Cavalier Years (1988) (with Richard Curtis) (Comic Relief special)
Mr. Bean (1989) (with Rowan Atkinson, Richard Curtis, Robin Driscoll)
Blackadder Goes Forth (1989) (With Richard Curtis)
The Last Laugh (1990)
Ben Elton: The Man from Auntie (1990)
Rowan Atkinson Live (1992) (with Rowan Atkinson, Richard Curtis)
Stark (1993)
The Thin Blue Line (1995)
The Ben Elton Show (1998)

Appendix III

BBC Sitcoms 1973 - 1984

(Full series only)

Casanova '73 (1973) wr. Ray Galton/ Alan Simpson, prod. Harold Snoad.

Oh Father! (1973) wr. David Climie/Austin Steele, prod. Graeme Muir.

Son of the Bride (1973) wr. John Kane, prod. Peter Whitmore

Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads (1973) wr. Dick Clement/Ian La Frenais, prod. James Gilbert/Bernard Thompson

Whoops Baghdad (1973) wr. Sid Colin/David McKellar/ David Nobbs/Roy Tuvey/ Maurice Sellar/Peter Vincent/Bob Hedley, prod/ John Howard Davies.

Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em (1973-75, 1978) wr. Raymond Allen, prod Michael Mills/Sydney Lotterby.

Are You Being Served? (1973- 1985) wr. David Croft/ Jeremy Lloyd, prod. David Croft

It Ain't Half Hot, Mum (1974) Wr. David Croft/Jimmy Perry, prod. David Croft/ Graeme Muir.

No Strings (1974) wr. Carla Lane, prod. John Howard Davies.

The Prince of Denmark (1974) wr. Barry Cryer/Graham Chapman, prod. Douglas Argent.

Second Time Around (1974) wr. Richard Waring, prod. Graeme Muir

Happy Ever After (1974-78) wr. John Chapman/Eric Merriman/ Christopher Bond/ John Kane/Jon Watkins, prod. Peter Whitmore/Ray Butt.

Porridge (1974-78) wr. Dick Clement/Ian Le Frenais, prod. Sydney Lotterby.

Last of the Summer Wine (1974-2003) wr. Roy Clarke, prod. Alan J W Bell/Sydney Lotterby/ James Gilbert/ Bernard Thompson/ Robin Nash.

The Growing Pains of PC Penrose (1975) wr. Roy Clarke, prod. Douglas Argent.

My Honorable Mrs (1975) wr. Richard Waring, prod. Graeme Muir.

The Rough with the Smooth (1975) wr. John Junkin/Tim Brooke-Taylor, prod. Harold Snoad.

The Good Life (1975-78) wr. John Esmonde/Bob Larbey, prod. John Howard Davies.

Fawlty Towers (1975-79) wr. John Cleese/Connie Booth, prod. John Howard Davies/Douglas Argent.

I Didn't Know You Cared (1975-79) wr. Peter Tinniswood, prod. Bernard Thompson.

Well Anyway (1976) wr. John Bird/John Fortune, prod. Dennis Main Wilson.

The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin (1976-80) wr. David Nobbs, prod. Gareth Gwenlan/John Howard Davies.

Open All Hours (1976-85) wr. Roy Clarke, prod. Sydney Lotterby/Robin Nash

Mr Big (1977) wr. Peter Jones/Christopher Bond, prod. Dennis Main Wilson.

No Appointment Necessary (1977) wr. Peter Robinson/Hugh Stuckey, prod. Douglas Argent, Harold Snoad.

A Roof Over My Head (1977) wr. Barry Took, prod. Douglas Argent.

The Other One (1977-79) wr. John Esmonde/Bob Larbey, prod. John Howard Davies, Roger Race.

Citizen Smith (1977-80) wr. John Sullivan, prod. Dennis Main Wilson/Ray Butt.

Rosie (1977-81) wr. Roy Clarke, prod. Bernard Thompson.

Come Back Mrs Noah (1978) wr. David Croft/Jeremy Lloyd, prod. David Croft.

Going Straight (1978) wr. Dick Clement/Ian Le Frenais, prod. Sydney Lotterby.

Rings on their Fingers (1978-80) wr. Richard Waring, prod. Harold Snoad.

Bloomers (1979) wr. James Saunders, prod. Roger Race.

Two Up, Two Down (1979) wr. Janey Preger, prod. Tara Prem

To the Manor Born (1979-81) wr. Peter Spence/Christopher Bond, prod. Gareth Gwenlan

Potter (1979-83) wr. Roy Clarke, prod. Peter Whitmore, Bernard Thompson

Grandad (1979-84) wr. Bob Block, prod. Jeremy Swan

Terry and June (1979-87) wr. John Kane/Terry Ravenscroft/Dave Freeman/Greg Freeman/Jon Watkins/Colin Bostock-Smith/Eric Merriman/John Chapman/David Grigson, prod. Peter Whitmore/Robin Nash/John B. Hobbs.

Oh Happy Band (1980) wr. David Croft/Jeremy Lloyd, prod. David Croft

Time of my Life (1980) wr. Jim Eldridge, prod. Dennis Main Wilson

Sink or Swim (1980-82) wr. Alex Shearer, prod. Roger Race/Gareth Gwenlan

Yes, Minister (1980-82) wr. Antony Jay/Jonathan Lynn, prod. Stuart Allen/Sydney Lotterby/Peter Whitmore

Coming Home (1981) wr. David Fitzsimmons, prod. Sydney Lotterby

Partners (1981) wr. Richard Waring, prod. Harold Snoad

Roger Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1981) wr. John Fortune, prod. Dennis Main Wilson

Seconds Out (1981-82) wr. Bill MacIlwraith, prod. Ray Butt

Solo (1981-82) wr. Carla Lane, prod. Gareth Gwenlan

The Last Song (1981-83) wr. Carla Lane, prod. Sydney Lotterby

Hi-de-Hi (1981-88) wr. David Croft/Jimmy Perry, prod. David Croft/John Kilby/Mike Stephens

Sorry! (1981-88) wr. Ian Davidson/Peter Vincent, prod. David Askey

Only Fools and Horses (1981-96) wr. John Sullivan, prod. Ray Butt/Gareth Gwenlan/Bernard Thompson.

Goodbye Mr Kent (1982) wr. Peter Vincent/Peter Robinson, prod. Gareth Gwenlan.

L For Lester (1982) wr. Dudley Long, prod. Dennis Main Wilson

The Young Ones (1982-84) wr. Rik Mayll/Lise Mayer/Ben Elton, prod. Paul Jackson

Climber, The (1983) wr. Alex Shearer, prod. Alan JW Bell

Pinkerton's Progress (1983) wr. Charles McKeown, prod. Gareth Gwenlan

Sweet Sixteen (1983) wr. Douglas Watkinson, prod. Gareth Gwenlan

Tears Before Bedtime (1983) wr. Richard Waring, Prod. Harold Snoad

Dear Ladies (1983-84) wr. George Logan/Gyles Brandreth/Patrick Fyffe, prod. Mike Stephens/Peter Ridsdale Scott/Mike Smith

Just Good Friends (1983-86) wr. John Sullivan, prod. Ray Butt

No Place Like Home (1983-87) wr. Jon Watkins, prod. Robin Nash

Don't Wait Up (1983-90) wr. George Layton, prod. Harold Snoad

The Fainthearted Feminist (1984) wr. Jill Tweedie/Christopher Bond, prod. Zanna Beswick

The Hello Goodbye Man (1984) wr. David Nobbs, prod. Alan JW Bell

The Magnificent Evans (1984) wr. Roy Clarke, prod. Sydney Lotterby

Sharon and Elsie (1984-85) wr. Arline Whittaker, prod. Roger Race/Mike Stephens

Fairly Secret Army (84-86) wr. David Nobbs, prod. Peter Robinson

The Front Line (1984-85) Wr. Alex Shearer, prod. Roger Race

Lame Ducks (1984-85) wr. Peter J Hammond, prod. John B Hobbs

Leaving (1984-85) wr. Carla Lane, prod. John B Hobbs

Allo Allo (1984-92) wr. David Croft/Jeremy Lloyd/Paul Adam/John Chapman/Ian Davidson/Ronald Wolfe/Ronald Chesney, prod. David Croft/John B Hobbs/Mike Stephens

Appendix IV

Writers' Contracts

Examples of correspondence between the agent for writers John Esmonde and Bob Larbey and the BBC Contracts Department give an insight into the relationship between writers and the BBC and the esteem in which they were held.

Esmonde and Larbey's initial fee for writing *The Good Life* was £1200 per script (BBCWAC, RCONT 20, John Esmonde 1970-74, Memo David Gower to C. Dev. Tel, through controller BBC1 19/11/74).

A year later an amount of £1600 per script was offered. It was pointed out that this was a considerable increase in a relatively short period of time (BBCWAC, RCONT 21 John Esmonde Copyright 1975-79, Memo David Gower to Sheila Lemon 8/10/75).

The following year, Esmonde and Larbey's agent Sheila Lemon wrote to David Gower in the Copyright department asking for a payrise of 21 per cent for their next series, *The Other One*.

This, she said, was to cover inflation and because "the outstanding success of the *Good Life* merits some real gesture of recognition on the part of the BBC. The percentage rise I am suggesting need not, after all, cause such heavy breathing in high places if it is remembered that John and Bob write the pilot and first series at well below their established rate, which was then at least £1500. (As I told you, they had already been on a fee of £2000 from LWT in 1973, but I know the BBC professes to pay no heed to what I think they tend to dismiss as the vulgar extravagances of the commercial companies! – I will, therefore, refrain from repeating this argument here) (BBCWAC, RCONT 21 John Esmonde Copyright 1975-79, letter Sheila Lemon to David Gower, 4/11/76).

David Gower replied that "the BBC is not in a position to pay index-linked fees. Unfortunately, our income is not so linked... Currently, Esmonde and Larbey are well on the top of the heap as far as the BBC is concerned in recognising their reputation, quality, etc., etc." (BBCWAC, RCONT 21 John Esmonde copyright 1975-79, letter David Gower to Sheila Lemon 9/12/76)

He offered £1850, which was accepted, representing a considerable pay rise over just two years for a writing team which had proved themselves so conclusively with *The Good Life*.