

The Vicar of Dibley

Christmas Special 2006

BBC website: bbc.co.uk/comedy/vicarofdibley/

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'WE KNOW HOW TO USE OUR MIGHTY WEIGHT AND THE POWER OF A FULL AND VOLUPTUOUS BODY'

Dawn French is undoubtedly the biggest thing on British television this New Year as she flattens both the opposition and the critics

By William Langley

In a godless week of television, it was thanks to Dawn French that religion finally got a look in. *Dr Who* brought us homicidal Santas, and the misfits of *Little Britain* took their kookiness abroad, but *The Vicar of Dibley*, a long-in-the-tooth show about a chocoholic clergywoman, drew a ratings-topping 11.5 million viewers, and is likely to do even better tomorrow night as the series, which began in 1994, finally comes to an end.

How can this be when the cuff-shooting spivs who run the schedules say there's no market for shows tailored to the delicate preferences of middle-class viewers? And when their doubts are echoed by critics whose reviews of *Dibley* have tended to feature prominently the words "horse", "dead" and "flogging"?

At the core of the show's indestructible appeal is the even less destructible popularity of 49-year-old Ms French, Britain's favourite Fat Lady, and a hard-to-shift obstacle to the theory – most recently aired by the polemicist and provocateur, Christopher Hitchens – that women are incapable of being funny. This notion, which enjoys a worryingly large following among television people, holds that when nature hardwired women, it somehow screwed humour into the wrong junction box. The result is that females can only be funny by being unfeminine. It's the ugliness and fatness, not the lines, that get the laughs.

They can't be talking about Dawn. Flawless of skin, beguiling of eye, and regularly voted among the sexiest women in Britain, she instinctively understands the subtle attractions of abundance: "Big women do sex fantastically well," she claimed recently. "We know how to use our mighty weight, and we know the power of a full and voluptuous body."

Phew! What treats must be in store for hunky accountant Harry Kennedy, her Dibley suitor, as he leads the Reverend Boadicea Geraldine Granger down the aisle tomorrow night. The vicar's wedding will conclude the run of a show that was always more than the gently wistful sitcom about English village life that it seemed. Its creator, Richard Curtis, who made *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*, took his inspiration from the 1990s controversy over the ordination of women, and while there is little overtly political – and even less theological – about the programme, it has, in its modest way, made the notion of female clergy less threatening.

It touched, in the process, on deeper themes. Last year, when the show was surprisingly (at least to the critics) voted Britain's best-ever sitcom, its appointed advocate, Carol Vorderman, declared: "*The Vicar of Dibley* stands alone in that at its heart it's about the struggle to be good, to be tolerant and patient and still be funny... and that's not easy. But it never gets overly sentimental. There's a dash of whisky in the bedtime drink, a suspender belt under the cassock. Geraldine Granger is a fantastic comic creation – and she's played by one of the greatest comic actors Britain has ever produced."

Her life, like that of many comic actors, has not always been funny. Dawn was born in Holyhead, North Wales, the daughter of childhood sweethearts from Devon. Her father, Denys, was in the RAF, her mother, Roma, kept books, and later ran a dog-grooming parlour. Neither of them had any interest in showbusiness. Nor, as they looked at their short, dumpy, self-doubting daughter, would they have imagined that it was where her future lay.

ENTERTAINMENT

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Her father could understand her unhappiness. He suffered from it himself. "He taught me to value myself," she has said. "He told me that I was beautiful and the most precious thing in his life." Yet Denys French was a troubled man. When Dawn was 19 he drove the family car to a quiet spot in the countryside near the family home, attached a hose to the exhaust pipe, and committed suicide.

She moved to London, studying at the Central School of Speech and Drama, with the idea of becoming a drama teacher. A fellow student, one she took no great liking to, was Jennifer Saunders. "I hated her on sight," says Saunders. "She had gone to drama classes as a child. I thought she was cocky, and she thought I was snotty."

By the end of the final year they were sharing a flat and doing little comedy routines to amuse their friends. It wasn't until 1980 that Jennifer, then on the dole, saw in a trade paper that the Comic Strip, a new club venue in Soho, was seeking performers. French and Saunders, as they styled themselves, were granted a turn. "We weren't very good," remembers Jennifer, "but they were desperate for women to make it more politically correct, and we were the first living beings with boobs to come through the door. We had one sketch where we dressed like Thunderbirds puppets, and one of us said: 'What's the time, Brains?' and the other said: 'Six o'clock Mr Tracy', and that was it. God knows how anyone thought it was funny."

Out of the Comic Strip's subsequent success grew a TV show, *The Young Ones*, starring Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer, Adrian Edmondson and Christopher Ryan, in which French and Saunders occasionally appeared. Whatever the defects in their material, audiences seemed to warm to the pair, and – joined by Tracey Ullman, and helped by the rising young black comedian Lenny Henry – they landed a new show, *Girls On Top*.

In 1984, Dawn and Lenny were married. It has not been the smoothest union, even if by showbusiness standards it looks like a miracle of longevity. Unable to have children of their own, they adopted a mixed-race baby girl. The process was severely complicated by the adoption authorities' insistence that Dawn was too fat to be a good mother. She was forced to lose six stone – an ordeal that put her off dieting for good.

You can debate the issue of its allure, but Dawn is surely sincere when she says that the fatness suits her. More than a stage prop, it is a core part of her character to such an extent that she says she doesn't know herself when she sheds weight. Neither does her husband. "He said: 'Who are you doing this for? Please say it isn't me, because I haven't asked you to do it, I didn't want you to do it.'"

Seven years ago, Lenny was caught sneaking a slender Australian blonde into his York hotel room. Dawn has described this event and the subsequent fall-out as "a big old wobble" in their marriage. It led to the couple's lengthy disappearance from the public eye, followed by Lenny booking into the Priority rehab clinic with what were described as "stress" problems.

Things appear to be better now. "I'm constantly reminded of how much in love with him I am," she said earlier this year. "I have little moments, perhaps, when I'm not noticing it. Then I might drive away, and I do have the aching feeling of missing him that reminds me of what we have."

Will we have a similarly aching feeling for *Dibley*? The fashionable view is that the show should have been given a decent Christian burial years ago. The viewers, perversely, disagree. Perhaps because, for all the time it has been with us, the show consists of precious few episodes. Leaked accounts of the final one suggest a sci-fi themed wedding with Daleks as bridesmaids. The BBC is saying nothing, but then it doesn't really need to. We already know that all opposition programming will be exterminated.

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