

The Insider

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Your Connection to the BBC Sales Company

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Editor's Note

I'm normally the kind of person who can joke about absolutely anything, but the events that occurred on September 11th left even me without a punchline.

I'm not the only one. The whole tone of comedy changed as late-night talk show hosts struggled to figure out what to say and how to say it. Like the rest of the nation, they cried. Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, could barely hold back his tears as he explained that the view from his apartment had been the World Trade Center, but now the Twin Towers were gone. He ended by saying that the word "subliminal," a malaprop *The Daily Show* often used to ridicule President Bush, "is no longer a punch line."

Politicians and current events have always provided a rich vein of material for comics, but those topics now seem to be off limits. I hope this trend is just a temporary one. The events of September 11th were incomprehensible and tragic beyond belief, yet we should never forget that along with time, humor and laughter are the great healers. Let's use them.

Enjoy this issue and talk to you next time.

Michelle Street, Editor

Felicity Kendal

An Extraordinary Life

Felicity Kendal is not what she appears to be. For starters, this role model for what some think British women *should* be wasn't even raised in Britain. Add to that the fact that the ageless sex symbol once honored as "Rear of the Year" grew up a plump, somewhat insecure child whose sister nicknamed her "Fatty Foo." Finally, tack on a domestic life miles away from the loyal, stand-by-your-man wife she portrayed so well and you see that Felicity Kendal's life has been anything but the mundane suburbia she inhabited in *The Good Life*.



The imprint of my nomadic years is still with me. I like nothing better than to pack my bags and set off to somewhere else: it matters little where that somewhere is, it's the going that counts.

*From **White Cargo**, Felicity Kendal's autobiography.*

Her father made sure of that. Geoffrey Kendal (actually born Geoffrey Bragg in the town of Kendal) was a flamboyant, larger-than-life figure who despised normalcy. His wife Laura was a small, beautiful woman from whom Felicity inherited her lovely round face and enormous inner strength.

The Kendals were actors with a capital A who shared a passion for the works of Shakespeare and fell in love while playing the leads in *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1933 they had a daughter, Jennifer, who was followed fourteen years later by Felicity.

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The Insider Mailbox



MORE OF AS TIME GOES BY?

We've just read our first issue of *The Insider*. Loved it! Please tell us ... is *As Time Goes By* continuing??? We were sorry to read about 'Madge' -- she was wonderful!

Thanks!

Ann Shearer, PA

EDITOR REPLIES: Thanks for the kind words. Glad you're enjoying *The Insider*. I think everyone would like to see another series of *As Time Goes By*, but the problem comes mainly with working around Judi Dench's hectic schedule. Of course if we hear anything we'll be sure to keep everyone posted.

WE HAVE WINNERS!

Thanks to everyone who entered *The Insider's* Second Anniversary Contest and for all the nice comments. The winners are:

1st prize of a box set of *Keeping Up Appearances* videos will soon be winging its way to Roslyn Elfer of Irving, Texas.

2nd prize of an *As Time Goes By* video has been won by Marilyn Kros of Milwaukee, WI.

Thanks again to everyone for their support of *The Insider*. Keep reading and let me know what you think!

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The Insider welcomes all correspondence. Send letters via e-mail to editor Michelle Street at bcdigest@soltec.com or by snail mail to: *The Insider*, c/o Greg Parsons, BBC Worldwide Americas, 747 3rd Avenue, New York, NY. 10017 - 2803. Include your full name and location. All letters are assumed to be for publication unless marked otherwise. **The Insider** reserves the right to edit letters for reasons of space or clarity. Let us know what you think!

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In The News



Rowan Atkinson recently fired off a scathing letter to the *Times* newspaper blasting a proposed law in the UK that would give increased powers to prosecute offenders on the grounds of promoting religious hatred. The *Blackadder* star said he was "aghast" at the measure, which would make it illegal to ridicule religions or make religious jokes. He claimed in his letter that there should be no subject that cannot be joked about – religion included. To that we say, here here, Mr. Atkinson.

Prunella Scales has been a busy lady lately. After doing a Radio 4 show along with **Patricia Routledge**, the ex Mrs. Basil Fawlty is starring alongside Clive Owen in a revival of the 1967 play *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* at the New Ambassadors Theatre in London's West End.

Also on the West End is **Roger Lloyd Pack** (Owen Newitt in *The Vicar of Dibley*), who is now appearing in the long-running comedy *Art* at the Whitehall Theatre.

Former *Ballykissangel* star **Stephen Tompkinson** is starring in the new BBC2 comedy *Mr. Charity*. Tompkinson plays the roguish Graham Templeton, the head of a local charity whose desire to do good is more selfish than selfless. This is Tompkinson's first sitcom since *Dtop the Dead Donkey*.

BBC viewers will have a chance to see two lost episodes of *Dad's Army* this Christmas. The episodes have been missing for 30 years and were found after a nationwide "Treasure Hunt" appeal by BBC archivists. Thanks to this appeal, archivists not only recovered the lost *Dad's Army* episodes (called *Operation Kilt* and *The Battle of Godfrey's Cottage*), but a lost Benny Hill episode, an audio session of The Beatles on *Jukebox Jury*, a 1931 radio version of *A Christmas Carol* and the first episode of the long-running quiz show *I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue*.

Leslie Ash, who plays the beautiful, blonde Debra in the British version of *Men Behaving Badly*, is recovering from the broken pelvis she suffered following a bizarre accident in her driveway. The injury occurred when she left the handbrake off her Range Rover and then became sandwiched between it and her other car. Because of this accident, Ash may be left with a permanent limp.

Meet Thermoman

My Hero

Ardal O'Hanlon Delights as TV's Newest Superhero

"In olden days a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking, now heaven knows...anything goes."

Cole Porter wrote those words in the 1930s, but they perfectly sum up the state of television today. Anything can and does go as networks strive to outdo each other. Just how much skin can women show? How many not-so-subtle sexual references can be crammed into a half-hour? How many twisted dysfunctionals can Jerry Springer have on in one program?



Perhaps it's gotten to the point where the best way to be shocking is not to be shocking at all. Sometimes you just want something gentle and sweet and that's why I love *My Hero*, starring Ardal O'Hanlon as George Sunday.

Most residents of Northolt know George as the owner of a local health store whose girlfriend is a nurse named Janet. What they don't know is that George is also superhero Thermoman, from the planet Ultron, who can sniff out trouble around the globe and dash off in an instant to fix it. He rescued a vacationing Janet from the Grand Canyon on one such mission and their lives changed forever. He followed her to suburban London, they fell in love, and now George deals with trying to keep the world safe while Janet deals with the fact that no one can know her boyfriend's true identity. Pity, because maybe then everyone would quit thinking that George is just plain weird.

The premise of a superhero in disguise or an alien getting used to life on Earth is an old one. It's been used in everything from *Superman* to *Mork and Mindy* and even *My Favorite Martian*, so the challenge is to bring something new to the plate and also get a strong lead actor who can convincingly combine naiveté and a child-like sense of wonderment.

On that count, the creators of *My Hero* could not have chosen better than to cast Irish comic Ardal O'Hanlon, who expertly played the naïve and innocent Father Dougal McGuire in the wonderful sitcom *Father Ted*. O'Hanlon brings an endearing charm to the role of George, who in times of distress dons his red Lycra Thermoman gear and flies off to solve all types of natural and man-made disasters.

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Janet (Emily Joyce) loves George and with the patience of Job attempts to teach him about life on Earth. However, he keeps messing things up. For example, Christmas is a major disaster when an off-handed comment from Janet makes

George thinks that sexy lingerie would be an appropriate gift not only for his girlfriend but also for her mom. Then he invites absolutely everyone Janet would prefer not to have over for Christmas dinner. However, in the end George always seems able to put things right and at least his intentions are good.

Another problem Janet has is that her parents aren't exactly fond of George. They feel he's just a demented Irishman sponging off their daughter. After all, business at George's health store isn't exactly booming maybe because George is often away saving the world and his assistant Tyler, an aging hippy with a spider web tattooed on his neck, tends to scare off customers. Tyler is the only other one who knows George's secret identity, but that's not a problem because even if he did tell no one would believe him.

Janet works for Doctor Piers Crispin (Hugh Dennis), a pompous git who has a local practice and also appears on a breakfast television show. He's actually more interested in being a celebrity and buying flash cars than in curing people, but this is the man Janet's parents would like to see her marry. Piers does have a crush on Janet, but she's hopelessly in love with George.

Also working in Janet's office is the receptionist, Mrs. Raven, a foul-tempered insult machine who does things like ring a bell and shout "UNCLEAN!" when a patient arrives with the flu. She also informs patients that she can't answer complex medical questions such as when the doctor's coming in.

These wonderful characters are the creation of Paul Mayhew-Archer, who wrote for *The Vicar of Dibley* and Paul Mendelson, the writer of *May to December*. These two veterans do a terrific job of showing how much can be done with just a little. You seldom see Thermoman "in action," so to speak, so there are limited special effects and this allows the show to emphasize the human factor. The program is not so much about Thermoman being a superhero, but a romantic comedy about the relationship between George and Janet. Mendelson says that part of the idea came from the life of one of his closest friends, an international lawyer who, like George, has to fly off anywhere at short notice.

The cast is excellent, though there are times when the supporting actors threaten to outshine the leads. Geraldine McNulty in particular is an absolute hoot as the sarcastic Mrs. Raven. No one can spew venom like she can, although George's cousin Arnie comes in a close second. The scene when these two meet for the first time is a classic - the invectives fly hot and heavy, but so does the attraction and it's a match made in heaven. Lou Hirsch is perfect as the wisecracking Arnie, who was a superhero until his powers were taken away after he began charging for his services. In one episode Arnie becomes depressed and does what depressed Ultronians do – he faces a wall and howls. George intercedes to get Arnie's powers back, but Arnie loses them again after he steals the Crown Jewels.

The likeable Emily Joyce is spunky and energetic as Janet, especially in the episode when Janet discovers she's pregnant. George imbues her with Ultronian superpowers and, thrilled with what she can do, Thermomum's exploits threaten to surpass those of Thermoman himself.

However, the bulk of the show falls on the shoulders of Ardal O'Hanlon and the Dublin native proves that the many accolades he won for his performance in *Father Ted* were no fluke. O'Hanlon is the very essence of low-key, self-deprecating charm, yet there is much more to him than meets the eye. After *Father Ted* he went back to doing stand-up and wrote a well-received first novel called *Knick Knack Paddy Wack*. He also did a dramatic turn as a journalist in the ITV series *Big Bad World* before returning to comedy in *My Hero*. The role of Thermoman is somewhat similar to that of Father Dougal, but I don't see O'Hanlon allowing himself to get typecast. He is simply too talented, too smart and has too many irons in the fire for that.

Overall, *My Hero* is a delightful throwback to the type of show that made many people fall in love with Britcoms in the first place. The characters are eccentric yet likeable, the pace is slower, and it's more about character than about one-liners. Add to that two very appealing lead actors and you have a great way to spend a half an hour. Plus, if you haven't gotten to know Ardal O'Hanlon yet, you should...he's a talent who will be around for a long time.



The Complete and Utter (Sorta) History of British Comedy

Part II: The 1970s

From Dead Parrots to Squashed Hedgehogs

British comedy entered the 1970s with some new sheriffs in town. They weren't technically new on the scene – they had all been around for almost a decade and separately (or in pairs) worked on much of what mattered comedically during the 60s. Yet when they joined forces there was a creative combustion that resulted in something ... well ...something completely different.

It may have been something different, but it wasn't exactly new. *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, which actually premiered in late 1969, took its cue from the brilliant Spike Milligan, whose series of programs under the moniker *Q* revolutionized British comedy with its departure from the typical sketch comedy format. Skits no longer needed to end on a punchline – in fact, they could be abandoned in mid-stream if necessary or simply flow without any rhyme or reason into the next scene.

The Python's took this concept and used it to produce 45 episodes of inventive, irreverent, flat-out silly television that is still worshipped thirty years later.

The secret was in the way they brought together individual strengths to form a unified whole. They fashioned a perfect blend of verbal gymnastics and stunning visual buffoonery, thanks to Terry Gilliam's mind-numbingly bizarre animations. Even the costume designers contributed a great deal, changing the men into suburban housewives, Scotsmen, Italian gangsters, and yes, even a tennis playing blancmange.

The four seasons of Python varied widely in quality. Some of the skits are almost painful to watch and once John Cleese got bored and left after the third season the quality deteriorated and the gang schlepped through one final season before they knew it was time to call it quits.

The Pythons could definitely stumble, but when they were good they were *really* good. I could spend the rest of this article spouting catchphrases and reliving the classic moments, but what I suggest you do before resuming this article is break out your videos or DVDs right now and watch a few selected moments. Take a restroom break, too – I have a lot more to tell you. ☺

The Pythons didn't end after they filmed the final television series in 1974. In fact, they became something of an industry. They toured, released records, and, thanks to the wonderful foresight of PBS station KERA in Dallas (the first station to show them here), became known in America.

Cleese, who left after the third season of the television show, returned to the Python fold when they toured and also joined them for the move to the big screen. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) was their first hit and they stirred up lots of controversy when they released *Life of Brian* in 1979. *Brian* was the subject of protest even before it was released, thanks mostly to a false belief that it was an attack on religion.

The Pythons have often been referred to as the comedic equivalent of The Beatles, and that's a fair assessment. They were the ones who broke the ground for British comedy in the States and on a personal level, I'll say that turning on the television one Sunday night and quite by accident seeing Cleese doing his famous silly walk is what sparked my own passion for British comedy.

The comparison to the Beatles is also appropriate because not much of what they have accomplished individually can match what the brilliance of what they created together.

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John Cleese has arguably fared the best. He followed up his stint with the most influential sketch comedy show ever by creating the program that is often regarded as the greatest sitcom ever.

Fawlty Towers first aired in 1975 and was collaboration between Cleese and his then-wife Connie Booth. As is well known, the inspiration for *Fawlty Towers* was a real-life hotelier that the Pythons encountered while on tour. Cleese used him to create a character in an episode he wrote of a sitcom called *Doctor At Large* and then expanded the character into the ill tempered, snobbish monster Basil Fawlty - not exactly the type of meet and greet smiler who should run a hotel, but there you go.

Fawlty Towers is not only Cleese's tour-de-force, but he is matched by the sheer power of Prunella Scales as Basil's wife Sybil and Andrew Sachs's memorable portrait of Manuel. Interestingly enough, when the series was entered for a prize in the prestigious Montreux (Switzerland) Television Film Festival, it didn't win partially because the Swiss judge found the character of Manuel offensive. "Funny foreigners may be a joke to the English, but not to us," he proclaimed. "We are your funny foreigners. Manuel is a character in dubious taste." Oh well, to each his own, but they ended up giving Cleese an award anyway for his special *Norway: Home of Giants*.

Fawlty Towers only lasted two seasons, probably because Cleese is easily bored and also because both he and Booth were intent on keeping the quality of the absolute highest caliber. The process had to be draining on them - they would spend weeks writing each episode due to the extraordinary care they took with the plotting and the language.

In fact, there was such concern about maintaining the high quality that *Fawlty Towers* almost ended after the first season. There was a four-year gap before Cleese and Booth were convinced that they could attempt a second season, but the wait was worth it. The series ended on the highest of notes and Cleese was never persuaded to do another. He would not risk seeing it become inferior or overstaying its welcome.

Meanwhile, Eric Idle created his own classic when he took the story of The Beatles and came up with a "mockumentary" called *All You Need is Cash*.

The idea for this grew out of Idle's first post-Python project, a show called *Rutland Weekend Television*. The program revolved around a very small television station and one of the guests on the Christmas special was George Harrison.

Idle's friendship with the ex-Beatle (whose money got *Life of Brian* made when the original distributor backed out) inspired him to create a spoof film that was shown when he hosted *Saturday Night Live*. It was a short history of that famous rock group The Rutles, the "pre-fab four" whose legend would "last a lunchtime."

SNL producer Lorne Michael was impressed and asked Idle to make a full-length special detailing the career of Dirk, Barry, Stig and Nasty, a.k.a. The Rutles. *All You Need is Cash* was shown on NBC in March of 1978, but it was one of the lowest rated programs that week.

Despite poor viewer support, *All You Need is Cash* remains a classic of the genre. The truth is it's probably just too clever for its own good. Idle and co-director Gary Weis provided beautifully detailed parodies of Beatles films such as *A Hard Day's Night* and they were helped immeasurably by Neil Innes, whose faux Beatle tunes provided an inspired soundtrack.

Whereas Idle was used to working on his own, Terry Jones and Michael Palin had normally written together when they were with the Pythons. After the troupe's demise, Jones and Palin continued the partnership and spent the rest of the 70s collaborating on a series of nine half-hour vignettes that went out under the title of *Ripping Yarns*.

These were based on the type of adventure tales popular in Britain during the early 1900s. The same strength that Jones and Palin brought to the Pythons - comedy that was more visual and atmospheric - was brought to this series. To keep their vision intact, they insisted that these be filmed instead of taped, and the added expense meant that only nine of them were made.

Palin also took the time to star in *Jabberwocky*, directed by Terry Gilliam and released in 1977. The film was visually stunning and imaginative, as could be expected from Gilliam, but it was perhaps too gory and dark for mainstream audiences and did disappointing business at the box office.

There were also smaller projects that kept the Pythons occupied and the 70s were a creatively fertile time for all of them.

THE GOODIES RULE, OK?

Yet the Pythons were not the only ones who excelled at being silly. Cleese and Chapman's mates from the Cambridge Footlights Club - Tim-Brooke Taylor and Bill Oddie - joined forces with Graeme Garden to create *The Goodies*.

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The Goodies was sold to the BBC when the trio went to Michael Mills, then head of BBC television comedy, and he told him that they wanted to a show about an “agency of three blokes, who do anything, any time.”

Of course, since the title is *The Goodies*, the things they do are for good. The three men kept their own name and facets of their personality for their television characters. Graeme is something of a nutty scientist, Tim is highly patriotic but a bit cowardly and Bill is a nature loving, bird watching hippy who writes goofy tunes.

The Goodies was the equivalent of a cartoon with real-life actors – very silly slapstick with a break for spoof advertisements. Sometimes they would be off to save the world from the likes of villains like that ferocious feline Kitten Kong, other times they sailed off to an undiscovered island, and they even took a break to do a marvelous spoof of John Travolta musicals.

The Goodies was a staple on British television from 1970 until 1982 and the series spawned several successful spin-offs such as books and even hit singles, one of which encouraged listeners to do a new dance called *The Funky Gibbon*.

SITCOMS RULE, TOO

While the Pythons and the Goodies were breaking new ground in sketch comedy, producer/writer David Croft was successfully and brilliantly carrying the flag for more traditional fare.

Croft still had a major hit in *Dad's Army* when one day he received a script from a young writer named Jeremy Lloyd. The story was taken from Lloyd's experiences at a department store called Simpson's and the title was a simple phrase that Simpson's employees probably used time and time again: *Are You Being Served?*

AYBS? embodied the typical order that existed in British society. Everyone at Grace Brother's Department Store had their position in the store's pecking order and was not expected to stray from it.

The humor that flowed from *AYBS?* can perhaps be summed up best in a quote from Monty Python: “Grin, grin, wink, wink, nudge nudge...say no more.” Croft himself termed it “seaside postcard” humor, meaning that it was laden with innuendo and big chested babes. Not to mention one very camp sales assistant.

The people loved it. John Inman as the fey Mr. Humphries and Mollie Sugden as the brassy Mrs. Slocombe were the breakout performers, but this was

very much an ensemble piece that stayed strong even through a number of cast and character changes.

Following the tumult and change of the 1960s, maybe the popularity of *AYBS?* can be explained by its inherent sense of nostalgia. It harkened back to a more ordered, civilized time when dressing well, good manners and knowing one's place were still of the utmost importance. It also took viewers back to a more simple time. Sure, the Benny Hill style humor was sometimes in questionable taste, but it was done with an air of innocence – the most famous example being that of Mrs. Slocombe's ongoing references to her pussy.

Yet above all, *AYBS?* was filled with colorful, distinct characters and enough catchphrases to float the proverbial battleship. No matter how many times Mr. Humphries said his signature “I'm free!” or Mrs. Slocombe claimed to be “unanimous in that” viewers couldn't help but laugh.

The show had its many detractors who thought of it as cheap, easy and tasteless, but they were definitely outvoted by millions of viewers. As was the norm with popular 70s sitcoms, the show was milked for everything it was worth. A film was produced in 1977 in which the employees of Grace Brothers went on holiday to Spain. There was also a stage play, an Australian version of the show, plus an attempt to make an American adaptation that didn't make it much past the pilot stage.

As if he didn't have enough to do, Croft also reunited with *Dad's Army* co-writer Jimmy Perry to create the story of a theatrical troupe based in India during wartime called *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*.

This show contained many of the same types seen in *AYBS?* and *Dad's Army*. Some of the men were camp and effete while others were the blithering, ineffective authority types whose behind was usually saved by the sensible underling. *IAHMM* gave the Croft/Perry partnership another sizeable hit that ran from 1974-1981.

An unusual Croft misstep occurred in 1978 when not even Mrs. Slocombe herself, Mollie Sugden, could make a hit out of *Come Back Mrs. Noah*. The concept was promising, with Sugden playing a housewife in the year 2050 who wins a chance to tour a new space exploration craft called the Britannia Seven. The vehicle is not yet in space, of course, but during her visit it accidentally blasts off and the rest of the series revolves around the attempts to get her back.

Croft wrote the series with his *Are You Being Served?*

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Radio Times Comedy Poll



The respected British publication *Radio Times* recently polled its readers to get their opinion on the best and worst in comedy. Here's a look at the winners, some of which had your intrepid editor scratching her head and saying, "Huh?"

Best sitcom: seventies

Fawlty Towers
Dad's Army
Porridge
Rising Damp
Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?

Your editor says:

The results here are pretty much as expected, since *Fawlty Towers* is generally considered one of the greatest achievements in sitcom history. It's a bit surprising, though, that viewers chose *Rising Damp* over that other great comedy starring Leonard Rossiter, *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*. Rossiter was equally good in both shows, but *Perrin* had more substance. Granted, there's a lot to choose from in the 70s, but where is the longest-running sitcom in television history – *Last of the Summer Wine*? How about *The Good Life*?

Best sitcom: eighties

Only Fools and Horses
Yes Minister
The Young Ones
Just Good Friends
The New Statesman

Your editor says:

Only Fools and Horses is a British institution, so it was a shoo-in for first place. John Sullivan, the show's writer, also wrote the program in fourth place, *Just Good Friends*. The energetic anarchy of *The Young Ones* and two great political satires – *Yes Minister* and *The New Statesman* (with Rik Mayall's wonderful portrait of the nasty MP Alan B'stard) – are great choices. Shocking, though, is the omission of *Blackadder*. And how about *Red Dwarf*?

Best sitcom: nineties

One Foot in the Grave
The Vicar of Dibley
Men Behaving Badly
The Royle Family
The League of Gentlemen

Your editor says:

With the exception of *The Vicar of Dibley*, this is a good list. Don't get me wrong – I love *Vicar*, but I don't think it's the second best comedy of the 90s. *Absolutely Fabulous* is not everyone's cup of tea (or glass of champagne), but I think it deserved to make the cut. I would also have voted for *Father Ted*. I was quite surprised, but happy, to see the dark and wonderful *League of Gentlemen* on the list. The one very surprising exclusion is the phenomenally popular *Keeping Up Appearances*.

Best sitcom: 2000 to present

My Hero
My Family
Black Books
That Peter Kay Thing

Your editor says:

My Hero beat the rest of the contenders by quite a margin, and I think it's a signal that people are ready for something more traditional and gentle. *My Family* has ultra-talented stars Robert Lindsay and Zoe Wanamaker while *Black Books*, a comedy set in a bookstore, is a collaboration between *Father Ted* writer Graham Linehan and award-winning stand-up comic Dylan Moran. It's only aired for one season, but received the prestigious

British Academy of Film and Television Art (BAFTA) award as Best Sitcom.

Best sketch show

Victoria Wood – As Seen on TV
Monty Python's Flying Circus
Not the Nine O'Clock News
That Was the Week That Was
The Fast Show

Your editor says:

BLASPHEMY! BLASPHEMY! BLASPHEMY! That's all I have to say. Victoria Wood is an extraordinarily talented writer and performer, but to put her show above the Pythons? ABOVE THE PYTHONs? HOW COULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED? OK, I have to take my medicine now. Otherwise, solid choices.

Worst ever sitcom

Chef!
You Rang M'Lord
On the Buses
Mind Your Language
Love Thy Neighbor

Your editor says:

Huh? What? *Chef!* is far from the worst sitcom ever. Granted, it lost something in its final season but Lenny Henry was terrific, as was the supporting cast. Nah...totally disagree with that one. And if *On The Buses* was so bad, how did it manage to last six seasons? The one addition I'd make is *That's My Boy*. I hate to say it because I love Mollie Sugden, but this show was pretty dismal.

Best satire/spoof

The Mrs. Merton Show
I'm Alan Partridge
People Like Us
The Day Today
That Peter Kay Thing

Your editor says:

The choices are good but the ranking is wrong. I'll admit to being a major Steve Coogan fan, so I'd put *I'm Alan Partridge* in first place, followed by the brilliant news spoof *The Day Today*. For my money they were two of the very best programs of the nineties, despite the fact that there were only six episodes of each. Coogan is reportedly bringing Alan back for another season, however.)

Best female sitcom character

Margo Leadbetter (*The Good Life*)
Hyacinth Bucket (*Keeping Up Appearances*)
Edina Monsoon (*Absolutely Fabulous*)

Mrs. Slocombe (*Are You Being Served?*)
Denise Royle (*The Royle Family*)

Your editor says:

Hmmm...I'm quite surprised that Hyacinth is not in first place, but Penelope Keith deserves kudos for turning what was a supporting character into something very memorable. I have to say, though, that Annette Crosbie (*One Foot in the Grave's* Margaret Meldrew) and Stephanie Cole as Diana Trent in *Waiting for God* could easily have made the list as well. I also have a soft spot in my heart for Geraldine McEwan as the crusty ol' Miss Farnaby in *Mulberry*.

Best male sitcom character

"Del Boy" Trotter (*Only Fools and Horses*)
Basil Fawlty (*Fawlty Towers*)
Captain Mainwaring (*Dad's Army*)
Victor Meldrew (*One Foot in the Grave*)
Norman Stanley Fletcher (*Porridge*)

Your editor says:

I said it before and I'll say it again: Where in the world is *Blackadder*? However, the BBC must've been heartened by these results since they are going to pay David Jason a ton of money to reprise the role of "Del Boy" in an upcoming series of *Only Fools and Horses* specials. Seeing Mrs. Slocombe's name on the list of memorable female characters makes me wonder, however, why Mr. Humphries wasn't included. Other strong contenders could've been Warren Mitchell as Alf Garnett (the role model for Archie Bunker) in *Till Death Us Do Part* and Wilfred Brambell as Albert Steptoe (the role model for the classic Redd Foxx character Fred Sanford) in *Steptoe and Son*.

Best American sitcom

M*A*S*H
The Phil Silvers Show (Sergeant Bilko)
Frasier
Friends
Seinfeld

Your editor says:

This is a tough one to call, but I'm surprised that either *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Cheers* or *The Dick Van Dyke Show* isn't there instead of *Friends*, which I like but am not sure will be watched twenty or thirty years from now.

So both the readers of the *Radio Times* and I have now spoken. How about you? Please send your thoughts on these choices to *The Insider*. Contact information is on page two.

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The Return of *Absolutely Fabulous*



Break Open the Bolly.... They're BAAACK!!!

I always joke that I want to start a nursing home for those aging disgracefully. It'll be a place where black leather jackets are standard issue and wheel chair drag races are a daily highlight. Heavy metal music will blare from the sound system and burly security guards will be needed to break up the food fights and watch over the mosh pit.

Mandatory television viewing will be *Absolutely Fabulous*, featuring the exploits of the ultimate role models for aging disgracefully – Edina Monsoon and Patsy Stone.

In case you don't know them, Eddy and Pats are best friends. They're also drug-addled boozehounds who shirk all responsibility for their actions and wallow in moral depravity. Eddy has two children – Serge, a son she never sees, and Saffron, who is an old soul in a young body. Saffy is technically the daughter, but is much more of a sensible adult than her mother ever will be.

The idea for *AbFab* came from a skit that Jennifer Saunders did with her partner Dawn French about an irresponsible mother and her hyper-responsible daughter. Saunders took the simple premise, ran with it, and created a classic.

AbFab first premiered in 1992 and the adventures of Eddy, Pats and Saffy quickly became nothing less than a pop culture benchmark. The show spawned catchphrases such as “Sweetie, darling,” and made French designer Christian LaCroix practically a household name. Harvey Nichols Department Store (or “Harvey Nicks” as Eddy and Pats call it) became as

familiar to fans as the store right next to it – a little place called Harrod's. Revlon even copped the title for a line of lipstick, much to the annoyance of Jennifer Saunders.

After three seasons there was a relatively disappointing special called *The Last Shout*. As its title implied, this was supposed to be the end of *AbFab*. Saunders then did a stand-up tour with Dawn French and also created another show called *Mirrorball*. This was a look at the theatrical world through the eyes of four eccentric characters. A pilot was filmed, directed by Jennifer's husband Ade Edmondson, and starring the *AbFab* cast of Saunders, Joanna Lumley, Julia Sawalha and June Whitfield. Yet instead of a full series of *Mirrorball*, Saunders decided instead to resurrect *AbFab*. She explained the decision-making process to the *Radio Times*:

“So I was in the kitchen with Ade and (BBC head of comedy entertainment) Jon Plowman, and I think Jon said, ‘Why don't you just write another series of *AbFab*?’ I said, “Ohhhh, all right.”

Smart move. The *Mirrorball* pilot had its moments, but something was missing. Perhaps seeing the same actresses together but as different characters was more than a bit disconcerting – at least to me. Lumley was still surly and chain-smoking, Saunders still neurotic and prone to pratfalls. It was nice to have Whitfield and Sawalha do something different, but even after several viewings, it just didn't have the same zing as *AbFab*.

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As the fourth season opens, Eddy has expanded her PR business to include television and the Internet. Yes, the woman who can't even keep one thing going is now the multi-tasking "Eddy Piehands." Saffy is singularly unimpressed with her mom's new ventures. "Anyone can stick an antennae up their bum and call themselves a television station," she sniffs.

Otherwise she's still the same drinking, drugging, trend-following Eddy, who struggles with her weight and lack of self-esteem. In the episode *Donkey*, she keeps a video diary as she goes through boot camp to conquer her weight problem once and for all, but it just doesn't work.

Poor, put-upon Saffy is still living at home, desperate to find a job so that she can move out. She's also an aspiring writer and in one of the better episodes, *Small Openings*, Eddy is furious to find out that Saffy has penned a play about her upbringing.

"It will make *Mommie Dearest* look like Winnie the bloody Pooh," Eddy whines to Pats. Mother and daughter have a *High Noon* style stand-off about whether the show should go on, but who's center stage for the opening night curtain calls? Eddy, of course.

Not a lot has changed with Pats, who's as wild as ever and still trying to defy the aging process – this time not with plastic surgery but with a dangerous drug called Parralox that she injects into her face. She also injects way too much of it into Eddy's face the night before Eddy is scheduled to appear on the Richard and Judy morning show, causing her to miss out on her fifteen minutes of fame she so desperately wants.

Nor has there been much change in Eddy's mother, played by the seemingly ageless June Whitfield. Mrs. M. has become a "silver surfer" on the Internet, but remains as endearingly dotty as ever, even mistaking Twiggy and her husband Leigh Lawson for Madonna and Guy Ritchie.

Eddy's indescribably bizarre secretary, Bubble, is present and accounted for but has gained a cousin – perky television presenter Katy Grin. Both parts are played by the wonderful Jane Horrocks.

Returning for all too brief appearances are Christopher Ryan and Mo Gaffney, who are hysterical as Eddy's ex-husband Marshall and his girlfriend, Bo. Bo is always on the lookout for the latest trend in celebrity spirituality and self-help, so she's had Marshall study the Kaballah and he shows up at Eddy's home a Rabbi.

Sadly, missing in action is Kathy Burke, who was so memorable as Patsy's fast-talking, almost indecipherable boss Magda.

So with almost the entire gang back, does Saunders do the series justice or should she have quit while she was ahead?

I was prepared for disappointment, but this season didn't let me down. It's still the same ol' *AbFab* – full of the political incorrectness, physical gags and over the top outrageousness that made the show famous. However, it's somewhat toned down and the program is the stronger for it, with Jennifer Saunders proving once again what a wonderful writer she is.

The first three seasons dealt with the vacuous world of fashion and PR, but in this season Saunders uses her keen satirical eye to explore the nature of fame – specifically how fleeting fame is and the celebrity feeding frenzy fueled by all aspects of the media. Instead of designers and PR gurus, she targets B-list "It Girls" and wickedly rips apart television presenters as embodied in the character of Katy Grin. She refers to some real-life Brit presenters, and even though we may not know the names we know the type, such as Kathie Lee Gifford and her successor, Kelly Ripa.

Another wonderful thing about this season is the number of delicious cameos. It's great to see 60s supermodel Twiggy playing herself. She is one of Eddy's last clients and eventually leaves to go with Eddy's arch rival Claudia Bing. Mick Jagger's former flame Marianne Faithful reprises her *Last Shout* role as God while the Devil is played by Anita Pallenberg, ex-girlfriend of Jagger's cohort Keith Richards.

I also have to admit that I also found myself entranced by the wonderful bits of design. The glass-front refrigerator showing all the bottle of champagne is too cool for words and as always, Macintosh computers and flat screen televisions prove to be the ultimate in hip accoutrements.

Jennifer Saunders has certainly proven herself capable of a lot more than *AbFab*, but I hope that from time to time she'll give us updates on the lives of these characters. And when it gets to the point where they're ready for a nursing home, just give me a call. I'll have a couple of rooms, plenty of Bolly and customized black leather La Croix jackets waiting. Cheers, sweeties.

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The Insider Review: *Coupling* Season Two



Season one of *Coupling* introduced six singles making their way through the big-city dating scene. Jane and Steve were a couple, but they broke up and Steve started dating Susan, who used to date Steve's good friend Patrick. Susan's best friend is Sally, who then becomes attracted to Patrick after finding out that he was "born very lucky."

The oddballs out are the wacky Jane, who Steve found so hard to break up with that she was deemed an "unflushable," and Jeff, an innocent, sweet kinda guy who's not had much experience with ladies (and is – to be honest – terrified of them), but still has plenty to say on relationships and women.

Confused? Well, watch *Coupling* and you won't be. Through these six characters writer Steven Moffat gives a bold, frank, hysterical look at modern relationships from both the male and female perspective. The first season included such gems as Jeff's run-in with the "woman with two breasts," Patrick and Sally almost having a fling, and all of them discovering the saucy contents of Patrick's video cabinet.

Since a good part of first season hinged upon the burgeoning relationship between Steve and Susan, and how their friends impacted it, I found it a bit odd that the second season begins with an episode about Jeff, played by Richard Coyle.

Poor Jeff. Once again he almost – but not quite – gets the gorgeous girl. This one is the woman on the train whose shapely legs he falls in love with, but as the episode progresses both he and Sally find themselves caught up in very different lies. In Jeff's case, however, it's a lie that's a lot harder to explain because he's told the girl of his dreams that he only has one leg. This episode is beautifully written, with the farce building to a wonderful climax, but I won't spoil things for you by revealing too much.

Perhaps writer Moffat focused on Jeff first because he knew where his bread was buttered. In season one, Coyle was the strongest link in an already strong cast, but his

character was also the most engaging. Jeff got to do a lot of the fun stuff, like explaining his whacked out theories about "unflushable" girlfriends and the importance of having a porn buddy.

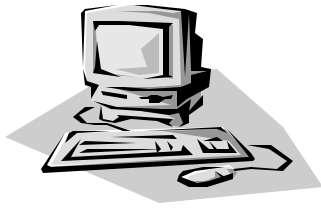
However, just when I think episode one is a signal that Moffat is going to hand the ball over to Richard Coyle, he becomes equally generous to the show's other stars. Ben Miles (as Patrick) and Kate Isitt (as Sally) get their turn to shine in a two-parter that has Patrick and Sally reignite their flirtation, almost become lovers, and then blame each other for Patrick's inability to ...ummm...perform. These are two more superbly constructed episodes, making good use of flashbacks and fantasy sequences.

These episodes also let Jack Davenport (who plays Steve) get a lot of laughs. His reactions and facial expressions when he accidentally sees Sally naked are priceless. Gina Bellman (Jane) is a riot as well when she attempts to befriend television personality Mariella Frostrup. Sarah Alexander may not get many punchlines, but is excellent as Susan, who can rake her boyfriend over the coals when he needs it.

Having established the characters in season one, Moffat uses these episodes to flesh them out beautifully. We meet Susan's parents, learn about Jane's job as a traffic reporter (and what happens when she loses it), and find out even more than we really care to know about Steve's predilection for "doing solos." (Don't ask.)

The subject matter and banter may be crude at times, but I don't think there's anyone who won't admit that the scripts have a ring of truth. I can't say enough for the strength of the writing – potential sitcom scribes could learn a lot from this series about how to craft thirty minutes of television comedy that actually end with a satisfying payoff.

There seems to be plenty of room to go with the characters and I'm ready to stick with them for the long haul, so please, Mr. Moffat, may we have some more?



SPOTTED ON THE INTERNET

Reviews by David Darryl Bibb

Felicity Kendal Fan Page

<http://www.brit-brat.com>

This site describes itself as "A fan site featuring the best British babe ever born, Felicity Kendal." That sums it up as well as anything I could say.

Here you'll find numerous photographs of Miss Kendal and, at the top, a Union Jack and the Flag of St. George. There are some very good features about the site such as the list of plays she has been in, desktop themes, a screen saver and snippets of shows.

There are also a number of negative things about the site. The most annoying is the background music that insists on playing, constantly and loud. It seems the Webmaster, not satisfied with just providing music, also felt the need to reset the controls level to blast the tune at full volume. I kept turning it down only to have it return full blast when it repeated the song.

Other features include a popup window with a Quizlet asking which feature of Miss Kendal the visitor finds most appealing, including her eyes, acting, attire, etc. I hate popup windows. The site also takes a long time to download and features a rather long section of text that is blue on blue. The text has alternating long and short lines, which make reading a bit of a bother. With a bit of cleanup and less volume on the music it would rate higher, but as it is I give it:

Rating: 3 mouse clicks

The Goon Show

<http://www.goon.org/>

The Goon Show Preservation Society is a fun site and a worthy stop for those interested in the history of British comedy. While not extensive, it has a section for those new

to this classic show that featured the talents of Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe. It offers membership in the society as well as a subscription to its journal. There are on-line articles, editorials, links, a shop and a number of other fun items for the fan. If all of the rest were not enough, there is the Telegoons section of the site where the puppet version of the show is remembered. I recommend this site for fans of the show and of British comedy.

Rating: 4 mouse clicks

French and Saunders

<http://www.frenchandsaunders.com>

This is *the* place to get official word on Jennifer Saunders and her partner Dawn French. Contains information not only about the ladies, but also about their collaborators such as *AbFab* script editor Ruby Wax and *Vicar of Dibley* writer Richard Curtis.

Rating: 3 ½ mouse clicks

Also Recommended

To purchase videos:

<http://www.bbcproducts.com>

Disclaimer: Please remember that the World Wide Web is an ever-changing place. The sites reviewed and recommended in this issue are operational at the date of publication. The Insider regrets any inconvenience caused by sites that move or close.

David Bibb is a Missouri-based British comedy addict.

Felicity Kendal (cont'd. from page 1)

Geoffrey also had a passion for the country of India and when Felicity was still a baby the family packed up and left behind cold, constrictive Britain for the heat and vast expanse of the Indian subcontinent. The trip was originally intended as a long-term stay, but apprehension following the assassination of Gandhi soon brought them back to the UK. Five years later they returned to India once again and stayed for good.

The Kendals set up a roving theatrical company, so Felicity's formative years were spent traveling the length and breadth of India while her parents and their troupe performed Shakespeare in everything from small schools to grand palaces. This nomadic existence included side trips to exotic ports of call such as Singapore and Japan.

The Kendal's transient lifestyle meant that any type of formal education for their children was at best scattered. Laura Kendal was a doting mother to Felicity and Jennifer, making sure that the girls were educated (mostly at convent schools) whenever they were in one place long enough.

What Felicity lost in formal education was offset by a priceless training in the theater. Her father was a strict taskmaster and put both of his daughters to work at a very early age doing odd jobs for the company. Felicity had her first speaking part at the age of six playing Puck in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* - a rather traumatic experience caused by her failure to remember her exit line.

Despite the constant change and the ups and downs of the theatrical life, it was a happy childhood full of adventure. Not only was Felicity simultaneously coddled yet challenged by her parents, but she also grew up feeling protected and loved by the motley assortment of eccentrics who formed their troupe.

Family troubles began, however, when Felicity's sister Jennifer became enamored of a handsome young Indian actor named Shashi Kapoor. Kapoor was himself from a distinguished theatrical family and Jennifer arranged for him to join the Kendal's troupe. Their relationship blossomed, but Geoffrey was fiercely protective of his family and had trouble accepting the relationship.

Intense arguments ensued between Jennifer and her father, who also had somewhat selfish reasons for not approving of the relationship. He was simply afraid that he would lose his daughter as a much-needed actress in his company. Yet despite his objections the couple got

married and left the troupe, but Kapoor went on to have a stellar career and is now considered a legend in the Indian film industry.

It was Felicity's turn to incur her father's wrath when the release of her first film, 1965's *Shakespeare Wallah*, set in motion a chain of events that caused her to return to England to pursue an acting career.

Shakespeare Wallah, an early collaboration of the team of producer Ismail Merchant, director James Ivory, and writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala, was loosely based on the diaries of Geoffrey Kendal. Felicity played Lizzie, a young actress who falls in love with a handsome Indian actor, played by her brother-in-law Shashi. Also appearing in the film were Felicity's parents and her sister.

The film was a critical success and its showing at film festivals in London and Berlin gave Felicity a taste of what else was out there. She had already seen much of the East, but the West - where she could truly prove herself - beckoned. She decided to try her luck in London.

Her father objected strongly. "You're a stupid little bugger," he told her. "They won't appreciate you in England. You'll end up marrying the first clot you meet, who will want you to settle down with a bunch of screaming kids. You'll end up in hell with mortgages and misery. And the climate's bloody awful."

Once again, Geoffrey's reaction was a combination of protectiveness and selfishness since the company was just about to embark on a tour of Japan and he needed Felicity. It was a heart wrenching decision, but Felicity's ambition won the day and she went to live with an aunt in Warwickshire, thus ending Geoffrey's dream that his daughters would one day take over his company.

At first, life in Britain was not kind. Felicity struggled to find an agent and acclimate herself to a culture that had become unfamiliar. Jobs were almost non-existent, despite the fact that she could legitimately claim years of theatrical experience even before she was out of her teens. She experienced plenty of homesickness and received almost daily missives from her father, who still thought she was making a mistake and would get sucked into a normal life.

The turning point came when she appeared in a television play called *The Mayfly and the Frog*. She starred

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opposite her father's idol Sir John Gielgud, who played a millionaire whose car bumps a young girl (Felicity) off her motorbike. She was given the part on the condition that she go blonde and lose weight, so this provided the first glimpse of the Felicity people came to know and love.

The role opposite Gielgud gained her quite a bit of notice, as did her theatrical work. While appearing in a production of *The Norman Conquests*, she had a visit from Richard Briers, who popped in after a performance to give his regards. Briers was already well-known and mentioned that he was going to do a "little comedy series" for the BBC. He asked Felicity if she wanted to look at the script and read for the part of his wife.

"I knew I would accept the part even if I hated the script," she wrote in her autobiography. "I needed the work and I liked Richard. I felt at ease with him from the moment I met him, and his comedy technique had already made him one of the best and funniest actors of his generation."

Felicity was then cast as Richard's wife in the show, called *The Good Life*. Her *Norman Conquests* co-star Penelope Keith was also drafted to play the uppity next-door neighbor Margo. The cast was rounded out by Paul Eddington, who was chosen to play Margo's henpecked husband Jerry.

The Good Life (renamed *Good Neighbors* when shown in the United States) was – like many classic Britcoms – not a hit right out of the box. An audience poll taken after the first episode showed that a majority of viewers were not overly impressed, judging it as "at best only mildly amusing." However, most agreed that Briers and Kendal were well matched.

Given a chance to grow, the show found its audience. Critics may have been dismissive, but viewers related to the theme of self-sufficiency and they also couldn't help but love the cast, who soon became the nation's sweethearts. Especially Felicity, who came an icon for what some British women *should* be – sweet, fluffy and loyal. Little did they know.

There were many reasons the cast was happy about the show's success. Of course it brought them fame and security, but the quartet became a mutual admiration society who truly enjoyed working together. It helped that they all came from a theatrical background and shared a similar work ethic along with a high standard of professionalism. They also became very close off screen, often spending weekends together.

However, they were not entirely like their on screen characters. In her autobiography, Kendal noted that Penelope Keith is indeed elegant and feminine, but not at all bossy. Paul Eddington may have been pushed around by his wife on the show, but off screen he was "masculine, attractive and with a twinkle for the ladies." She says Eddington and Briers were two of the funniest men she'd ever met. About herself she wrote, "The idea of my being devoted and a good little loving wife, meanwhile, was a bit of a company joke."

At that time she was married to her first husband, a tall, handsome blonde actor named Drewe Henley. They met while appearing together on a television play called *Gone and Never Called Me Mother* and developed an attraction, but Drewe was already married. Several months later, however, he decided that he and Felicity should be together, so he left his wife and they moved in together. They were married in 1968.

Felicity described the relationship as a "fairytale" at first, but the newlyweds soon found their marriage pressured by jealousy and ambition. This was before she made her mark in *The Good Life* and beneath that sweet exterior was a steely ambition. She was determined not to let anything or anyone get in the way of her career.

More pressure was put on the couple when Drewe was beset with mental problems. He was diagnosed as manic-depressive and sent to a clinic for medication and shock treatment. Things appeared to get better after his release and he was able to go back to work, but he was never the same man Felicity married.

On January 23rd, 1973 Felicity gave birth to "the blessing of her life," their son Charley. However, not even motherhood could dim her passion for her work, so she struggled to balance being both a mother and an actress. Charley became well acquainted with show business at an early age. Felicity brought him to rehearsals and when she played Princess Vicky in a television production of *Edward VII*, baby Charley was dressed in a Victorian dress and had his first role as Princess Vicky's daughter.

Sadly, not even their mutual love for their son could keep Drewe and Felicity together. The marriage finally ended while Felicity was finding fame on *The Good Life*, proving the old adage that when one part of your life starts going really well, the other falls apart. Her family and co-workers rallied around to support her and she threw herself even further into her work, appearing in plays during the evening while filming *The Good Life* during the day.

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The highlight of her stint on *The Good Life* was undoubtedly when the show's biggest fan, the Queen, came to see a special recording of the show. The cast predictably suffered from a bout of nerves, but Charley was on hand to present Her Majesty with a bouquet of flowers. It was the final episode of *The Good Life*, and what had been a class act all along went out on an extremely classy note.

On a personal level, it took a while for Felicity to get over the pain of the divorce from Drewe, but she emerged from the ordeal with greater confidence and self-reliance. When she was ready for another relationship she certainly didn't lack for male company and the insecurity she had always felt since the days when her sister called her "Fatty Foo" disappeared.

"I discovered that I was able to flirt my way into almost any pair of arms," she said in her autobiography, "and I experienced my own personal version of the raving sixties, somewhat belatedly, in the seventies. For the next ten years I was never without a love affair, never alone, never single. *The Good Life* image of the nice girl-next door was indeed just an image."

However, she was still a driven actress. Much of Felicity's post-*Good Life* career has revolved around her first love - the theater - but she also had a few juicy television roles courtesy of writer Carla Lane.

In 1981-2, she starred in *Solo*, playing a 30-year old named Gemma Palmer who throws out her cheating boyfriend and deals with the possibility that she might spend the rest of her life alone. A mother who keeps dropping hints about men she might like to go out with does not help her plight.

Then there was *The Mistress*, which cast Felicity against type as a woman who begins an affair with a married man. *The Mistress* was not received well, in part because the nation didn't want to deal with the fact that their sweetheart might not be so sweet after all and in general, the theme of a woman in love with a married man and not suffering consequences wasn't morally acceptable. It would actually take her much longer to totally trash her girl next-door image, appearing on *The Ruby Wax Show* as a whip wielding, black leather clad dominatrix. She would also show what a good sport she is when she allowed paint to be poured all over her on an episode of *French and Saunders*.

In 1983 she married director Michael Rudman. Their honeymoon was cut short, however, when her sister was diagnosed with cancer. Felicity dropped everything and

went to India to provide support along with her parents and Jennifer's family. Jennifer Kendal was 51 years old when she passed away in 1984 and her death was a devastating blow to the close-knit family. She left behind three children and a husband who has never been the same. Shashi Kapoor's once extraordinarily prolific output has slowed considerably since his wife's demise and the formerly svelte superstar has become something of India's answer to Marlon Brando.

Felicity's marriage to Rudman produced her second son, Jacob, but they divorced in the early nineties when word got out of an affair between Felicity and famed playwright Tom Stoppard. Stoppard was born in Czechoslovakia, but is much like Felicity in that he spent considerable time in India as a youth and had a passion for the theater.

One of Stoppard's most telling works is *The Real Thing* in which a playwright has a fling with the leading lady in one of his plays. He dedicated it to his second wife, Dr. Miriam Stoppard, and the lead role was originated by Felicity. Just how autobiographical this play was wasn't known for another nine years when the Kendal-Stoppard relationship was exposed. Both left their respective partners to be with each other, causing quite a stir in the show biz world.

Felicity became a regular in many of Stoppard's plays such as *Indian Ink*, and he even wrote roles specifically with her in mind. Yet this relationship, which began scandalously, was destined not to last either and Felicity eventually remarried her second husband Rudman.

During the late nineties Felicity spent a lot of time caring for her ailing father, who suffered a series of strokes and passed away in 1998. In 1999 she published her autobiography *White Cargo*, which combined her life story with journal-type entries to her father. It's an interesting work, not so much for what she tells but what she leaves out. There are extensive details about her parents, sister and career, but once she divorces Drewe Henley there is precious little about her private life.

Geoffrey Kendal never wanted a normal life for himself or his daughters. His youngest has gone from India to working with legendary actors on the West End and also working with those legendary pigs Pinky and Perky. Felicity's life has been a great adventure and one that cannot be described as simply good, but as extraordinary. Her father would be very proud.

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(History of the British Comedy, cont'd.)

collaborator Jeremy Lloyd and, along with Sugden, it featured other member of Croft's repertory company, including Ian Lavender (*Dad's Army*), Gordon Kaye (who later starred in *'Allo 'Allo*) and more. It only lasted one season, proving that perhaps Croft's strength laid in looking at Britain's past, not at its future.

Several other long-running Britcoms were products of the '70s. The marvelous Leonard Rossiter created one of British comedy's most memorable characters when he played the title role in *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*.

Reggie Perrin suffers a mid-life crisis of the worst kind when the numbing sameness of his life leads him to fake his own death. Is this his chance at a new start? Well, not really.

Reginald Perrin was one of the earliest and best examples of an adult sitcom that could provoke an equal number of laughs and thoughts. Rossiter created a memorable portrait of a man on the verge of a nervous breakdown and was ably supported by Pauline Yates as his wife. Geoffrey Palmer had one of his first substantial roles as Reggie's brother-in-law, Jimmy Anderson, a former military man who just can't seem to leave the service life behind.

At roughly the same time, Rossiter also starred in another popular series called *Rising Damp*. He played Rigsby, the grumpy, meddling landlord of a seedy boarding house. His tenants include a medical student (played by Richard Beckinsale, father of *Pearl Harbor* star Kate Beckinsale) and a young man who is a tribal prince in his African homeland. Rigsby pays the most attention, however, to his female tenant, a love starved spinster named Miss Jones, played by Frances de la Tour.

The fact that he could take on two such dissimilar characters at the same time paid testament to what a great talent Rossiter was and how much was lost when he passed away in 1984 at the age of 57. Rossiter was a driven perfectionist who demanded much of himself and of his co-workers, so when he missed a cue while in a stage production of Joe Orton's *Loot*, the cast and crew knew something was wrong. They found him in his dressing room, slumped over in a chair, the victim of a

heart attack. British comedy lost a legend at much too young of an age.

Tragically, the same fate befell Rossiter's *Rising Damp* co-star Beckinsale, who suffered a fatal heart attack in 1979 at the age of 31. Beckinsale was also doing double duty, starring in *Rising Damp* and also another 70s sitcom called *Porridge*.

It is little known in the States, but *Porridge* is generally considered one of the all time great Britcoms. It stars Ronnie Barker as habitual thief Norman Stanley Fletcher, who is sentenced to jail for five years. (In fact, the title is a slang expression for prison.) While there he tries to teach his cellmate, a first-offender named Godber (played by Beckinsale) the ropes.

The character of Fletcher was miles away from another that Barker would create during the 70s. In *Open All Hours* he played a shop owner called Arkwright. He is helped along at the shop by his nephew Granville (David Jason), who is desperate to experience life beyond the small town they inhabit.

Open All Hours was the creation of Roy Clarke, who may be the single most prolific writer in Britcom history. During the three-year gap between the pilot and the first season of *Open All Hours* he created and wrote the first three series of *Last of the Summer Wine*, which is now the longest-running situation comedy in television history, now entering its 24th season.

Last of the Summer Wine's is not only memorable because of its characters – the trio of elderly miscreants reliving their youth and the women they love – but it has always been served well by its location. The town of Holmfirth has always been as much a star of the show as Brian Wilde, Peter Sallis and the late Bill Owen. This setting, along with the music and scripts, combine to create a strong sense of time and place that is rare in any television program, let alone a sitcom. Like *AYBS?* viewers have been willing to follow this show through numerous cast and character changes.

Those are only a couple of the programs that can be attributed to Clarke, a former teacher who has carved a niche for himself with his uncanny ability to create characters and dialogue that perfectly reflect the north of England. Of course, during the 90s, Clarke would prove himself capable of creating the ultimate social snob when he wrote *Keeping Up Appearances*.

While Clarke depicted life in the north of England, Bob Larbey and John Esmonde tackled life in suburban

London with *The Good Life*. Like Reggie Perrin, Tom Good is going through a mid-life crisis. Rather than fake his own death, however, he quits his job on his 40th birthday and decides to become self-sufficient.

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He persuades his wife Barbara to support him with this idea, but little do they know what they've gotten themselves into. Everything will be home grown and made and their suburban backyard turns into a home for goats, pigs, and other things that really don't belong in suburban backyards. Luckily, their neighbors, the socially upscale Leadbetters, eventually learn to live with goats, pigs, and mud.

The success of the series impacted the career of its female leads the most. Felicity Kendal, as Barbara Good, became the object of every man's affection and, following her star-making turn as the uppity neighbor Margo, Penelope Keith was rewarded with her own sitcom, *To The Manor Born*.

To the Manor Born deals with a subject seen time and time again in British comedy: the class system. Keith gets to play another snooty blue blood in this series, but one who has fallen on hard times. Following the death of her husband, Audrey Forbes-Hamilton finds that she has unknowingly inherited something she didn't expect: a large amount of debt. She is then forced to sell her beloved family home, Grantleigh Manor, to the nouveau-riche Richard DeVere. This development plays havoc with Audrey's pride as she tries to save face with her social crowd.

DeVere is played by the suave Peter Bowles, who was actually the first choice to play Keith's husband in *The Good Life*, but declined the offer due to a theatrical commitment.

Over the course of twenty-one episodes the couple played cat-and-mouse and in the end said, "I do," meaning that Audrey could once again live in her home. This final episode still remains one of the most-watched programs ever in UK television history, with an audience of approximately 24,000,000.

Other sitcoms of the 70s included *On The Buses*, which was the British equivalent of *Three's Company* – vulgar, cheap and critically panned, but the viewers loved it and kept it going for six seasons. It was simply the story of a working-class bloke (played by Reg Varney) who, while not being driven crazy by his overly protective mother, his sister, and his lazy brother-in-law, was driving a bus and scaring up some trouble with his mate Jack.

Writer Carla Lane, who already had a hit with *The Liver Birds*, the saga of two Liverpool lasses, scored a hit with *Butterflies*. This somewhat downbeat Britcom is the story of Ria Parkinson (played by Wendy Craig), a woman going through a mid-life crisis, who feels like she'd better start grabbing life by its tail and fill the emptiness she feels before it's too late. How to explain this – and her growing attraction to an unhappily married man – to her family is something she finds difficult to do. Geoffrey Palmer played her boring but responsible husband, Ben, and Nicholas Lyndhurst had an early role as the Parkinson's son, Adam. The show's central theme – the temptation of adultery – is one that Lane would revisit later when she wrote *The Mistress*, starring Felicity Kendal.

DOUBLE THE FUN

The 70s were also a great time for British double acts. Ronnie Barker (when not playing Fletcher and Arkwright) teamed up with his physical opposite – the tiny, bespectacled Ronnie Corbett – as *The Two Ronnies*.

The Two Ronnies was more of your basic variety show with Barker and Corbett playing a number of different characters as well as engaging in musical numbers and spoof newscasts. During each show Corbett also had a solo spot, sitting in a large chair and doing a rambling monologue about anything and everything.

The show had a number of writers, including David Renwick, who would later write *One Foot in the Grave* and David Nobbs, who wrote *Reginald Perrin*. There were also contributions from all of the Pythons except for Gilliam. Yet the success of the show boiled down to the chemistry between the two men and the show remained popular for 15 years. The duo rang down the curtain on their partnership with a special in 1985 and Barker retired for good three years later. Corbett, however, resurrected his "in the chair" monologues during the late 90s for Ben Elton's series *The Man from Auntie*.

Though less known in America, the importance of another double act - Morecambe and Wise - cannot be underestimated.

Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise had been around since the late 50s, but their self-titled BBC series really took off during the late 60s/early 70s and sealed their reputation as a British comedy classic. Like *The Two Ronnies*, these men had a chemistry and a genuine affection for each other that could not be denied. Unlike Corbett and Barker, however, Morecambe and Wise relied only upon very few writers who kept the show going with its trademark Benny Hill-style leering humor and energetic musical numbers.

The duo spent many years taking their show between the BBC and its competitor and sadly, their final series (in 1983) did not allow the duo to go out on a high note. Eric Morecambe, who had suffered from heart problems for years, passed away in 1984, but their show is still remembered as one of the high water marks in British television comedy.

(continued on next page)

THE GREAT SCOT ARRIVES

The 70s also heralded the arrival of one of the greatest of all comedic storytellers, Billy Connolly.

Connolly was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1942. He worked on the docks, had a stint in the military, and started his showbiz career on the coffee house circuit, playing the banjo and singing politically conscious folk songs. His act eventually developed to where it was much more about comedy than about music.

Connolly's unfailing Scots charm, nimble tongue and even more nimble mind made him quite a natural for the chat show circuit. Appearances on *Parkinson* and other shows, as well as the release of his first album, made him a star outside of his native Scotland.

His concert appearances soon began selling out and established him as a performer of the highest order. Not many people are capable of keeping an audience spellbound for two hours or more, but Connolly can. His material is sometimes political, sometimes autobiographical, but always honest and always hysterical.

Connolly later made a move to America when he replaced Howard Hesseman on *Head of the Class*, which led to another sitcom called *Billy*. Neither of these was an enormous success, probably because his personality is just too big to be contained to the small screen and the constraints of a thirty-minute sitcom.

Connolly has also done straight acting and received very good notices co-starring opposite Dame Judi Dench in the 1996 historical drama *Mrs. Brown*. It is typical of his natural irreverence that when he first found out Dench had expressed an interest in the role of Queen Victoria, Connolly shot back that his first choice was pudgy *Roger Rabbit* star Bob Hoskins.

Now closing in on 60 and a grandfather, Connolly shows no signs of slowing down. His tours still routinely sell out, he was a *Celebrity Castaway* in Antarctica (where yes, he actually danced around naked – the fool, and he has several films in the works.

NOT THE NINE O'CLOCK NEWS

The Pythons blasted in the seventies with their groundbreaking lunacy, but overall, this decade is often thought of as the age of the twee sitcom as epitomized by *The Good Life*. The last year of the decade, however, was a transitional one - a year when comfortable, safe suburbia was replaced by the cheek and impertinence of *Not The Nine O'Clock News*.

NTNOC replaced the second season of *Fawlty Towers* on BBC's schedule and the original cast was comprised of Rowan Atkinson, Mel Smith, Chris Langham and Australian comedienne Pamela Stephenson. Langham left following the first season and his role was taken by Griff Rhys Jones.

Rowan Atkinson may be the only name familiar to Americans, but the entire cast became household names in the UK. *NTNOC* was an important step in Atkinson's career and it gave an early glimpse of what would make him famous – the verbal pyrotechnics, the skits where he played vicars or stern headmasters, and the physical stunts that would he later perfect as Mr. Bean. Believe it or not, he even sang.

The others brought in their own strengths, with Pamela Stephenson in particular providing some great impressions – especially that of your typical BBC newsreader.

The spoof news show has been done many times, but *NTNOCN* distinguished itself by being very fast paced, very smart, often topical and written by a slew of highly talented people. Among the numerous contributors were Richard Curtis (*Vicar of Dibley*), Douglas Adams (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*), Nigel Planer (*The Young Ones*), Peter Richardson (*The Comic Strip Presents...*) and American Ruby Wax, who would go on to become a celebrity in the UK and the script editor for *Absolutely Fabulous*.

The reason there were so many writers was the fact along with the main writing staff, the BBC would allow wannabe writers to send in jokes and skits for possible use. Not a bad idea at all, seeing as it would allow the network to chance to discover and develop new talent.

The show is remembered for some of the sharpest political satire since the heyday of *That Was The Week That Was* during the 60s. One of the more controversial jokes was a short newsblurb containing a shot of Muslims bowing and praying to Mecca. A voiceover then says, "And the search goes on for the Ayatollah Khomeni's contact lens."

There were also spoofs of rock bands as well as the increasing influence of MTV (a catchy tune called *Nice Video, Shame About The Song*) and a skit about hedgehogs

being squashed under a truck, for which Rowan Atkinson issued a mock apology.

Not The Nine O'Clock News was the beginning of a revolution that in the next decade would turn into downright anarchy. But more on that in the next issue, when *The Insider's* History of British Comedy continues into the 1980s.

