



The Insider

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Your Connection to the BBC Sales Company

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Editor's Note

I'm officially dubbing this the "Michelle goes nuts" issue. Two of the pieces detail tasks that about drove me crazy.

First, read my article on *The Funny Ladies of British Comedy* and you'll understand why the last few months have been looney tunes for yours truly. I'm not the only one. Putting the special together drove several people to the brink of insanity, but we ended up with something we know you'll enjoy. So pledge not only to support Britcoms (*that's* the most important thing), but also to help with our psychiatrist bills. Just kidding – send me a pound of Starbucks and I'll be happy.

The other task that came close to driving me crazy was choosing my top twenty favorite Britcom moments. What was in my brain when I decided to do that? It was like choosing the clips for *Funny Ladies*. I kept thinking, "How could I leave *that* out?" and changed my mind at least a thousand times. So I'm counting on you educated Britcom aficionados to add to the list. Contact information is on page two and I look forward to hearing your favorites. Just don't forget the Starbucks.

Michelle Street, Editor

PRUNELLA SCALES ***Much More than Sybil***

Prunella Scales absolutely deplores the categorization of actors as either "serious" or "comic." To her, everyone in the profession is simply an actor and, as such, shouldn't be pigeonholed. It is her assertion that these stereotypes have kept viewers from witnessing great dramatic performances from actors mainly known for comedy.



One of the reasons I wanted to be an actress was because it gave me a chance to play people infinitely more interesting than I am and say things that are infinitely more witty and entertaining than anything I could ever think of myself.

-Prunella Scales on herself

She has a point. After all, she is best known for her masterful comic turn as Sybil Fawcett in *Fawlty Towers*. Those twelve episodes – a tiny portion of her working life - clearly defined her as a "comic" actress. Yet as you will see, there is much more to this wonderfully talented woman.

Prunella Scales was born Prunella Margaret Rumney Illingsworth on 22 June, 1932 in Sutton Abingers, Surrey. Her mother, Catherine Scales, was an actress and Prunella took her last name when she followed in her footsteps.

Prunella was a quiet, studious child who grew up in a farmhouse with only books, a record player and a radio for entertainment. Thanks to this environment she became quite scholarly and a voracious reader.

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The Insider Mailbox



In The News



MORE VICAR OF DIBLEY?

I love *The Vicar of Dibley* and especially enjoy Dawn French as Geraldine and Emma Chambers as Alice. Is there any chance more episodes will be made?

S. Lewis, MD

EDITOR REPLIES: We wish! However, with the incredibly busy schedules of star Dawn French and writer Richard Curtis (who wrote and directed the recent hit movie *Love Actually*), I don't think anyone should be holding their breath. Dawn French did tell *The Insider* a couple of years back that if time can be found she's committed to the series, so never say never. Fingers crossed!

MONARCH OF THE GLEN

I am an avid fan of *Monarch of the Glen*. I have had the good fortune to travel in Scotland and in particular in the highlands. In your recent issue of Best of The Insider you mentioned that some of the scene are shot at Ardverikie House. What village is it near and is it open for tours?

Denny McGuire, WI

EDITOR REPLIES: The estate used as Glenbogle is found near the towns of Badenoch and Strathspey. For more information, check out the terrific web site at <http://www.monarchcountry.com>. It takes you a virtual tour of the area and provides links to further information.

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The Insider welcomes all correspondence. Send letters via email to editor Michelle Street at michelle.street@netzero.com or by snail mail to: *The Insider*, c/o Oliviu Savu, BBC Worldwide Americas, 747 3rd Avenue, New York, NY. 10017 - 2803. 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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Dame Judi Dench received a special award for her outstanding contribution to the theater at this year Olivier Awards in London. The award was presented by her *Shipping News* co-star **Kevin Spacey**, who emerged onstage singing the old standard "I've Got a Crush on You" and ended his speech by saying that she was the one "we have all had a crush on for a very long time." **Dame Judi** is currently appearing in the West End in an acclaimed production of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. The Olivier Awards are the UK's highest theatrical accolades.

What is the British public's favorite movie of all time? According to a poll of over 7,000 people taken on amazon.co.uk and the Internet Movie Database, it's *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

There's been some confusion about what's going on with **Rowan Atkinson** lately. According to some reports, the *Blackadder* star entered a clinic in Arizona to be treated for severe depression, apparently brought on by the critical drubbing he received for his last movie, *Johnny English*. This report was later denied by his publicist. Also reported – and then denied – was that Atkinson would play the evil Lord Voldemort in the next Harry Potter movie. No matter what the truth, we wish the notoriously private Mr. Atkinson well.

Chef! star **Lenny Henry** was the victim of a scary threat recently. A man made an anonymous call to the office of Henry's management company, threatening to cut off Lenny's head and then mail it back to them. Police are investigating the incident. In other news, Henry will soon begin work on a new series for BBC1 that will combine stand-up, impressions and music.

Richard Mylan has been chosen to replace **Richard Coyle** in the sexy sitcom *Coupling*. Coyle, who played Geoff, quit after three seasons to pursue other projects. Mylan will play a new character named Oliver.

John Inman, Nicholas Smith and 'Allo 'Allo! star **Gorden Kaye** are among the veterans appearing in a new sketch comedy show called *Revolver*. The show premiered in January.

THE FUNNY LADIES OF BRITISH COMEDY



The Insider takes you exclusively behind-the-scenes of a brand new pledge special

Oh God. Here we go again. The knots are already forming in my stomach and despite two months of treatment at the Betty Ford Clinic (caffeine addiction ward), I'm back on the cappuccinos. No more wimpy decaf for me, thank you very much. Make it a twenty ounce with a quadruple shot of espresso, barman. Pronto.

Funny how my friends seem to have started screening their calls.

Yes, I'm back at work on another special. After the stress and strain (but ultimately the joy) of working on last year's tribute to Mollie Sugden I've inexplicably been hired for *Funny Ladies of British Comedy*. This special is a look at ...well...the title is self-explanatory, isn't it? You can figure it out for yourselves, can't you? Cheesh....

What follows is my diary of a few crazy weeks during which I truly suffered for my art. In other words, I am now officially qualified to sing the blues.

WEEK ONE

Alrighty then. Time to get started on *Funny Ladies*. My first priority is to get organized. I grab a shovel and start digging through the mountain of tapes in my front room. Oh, so *that's* where the cat's been. Good to see you, kitty.

I can tell from the get-go that this isn't going to be easy. At all. Look at the number of phenomenally talented women who have graced our television screens over the past few decades. These are ladies I truly respect and I want to give everyone her due. But how will I ever encapsulate the brilliance of Prunella Scales, Dame Judi Dench, Penelope Keith, Patricia Routledge and other great performers in an hour? How will I choose from the many wonderful moments contained in *Keeping Up Appearances*, *The Vicar of Dibley*, *Waiting for God* and more?

I take notes and pray for the best.

WEEK TWO...

Meanwhile, out in Iowa a man works the phone setting up interviews for the special. I think *I* have it bad, but he has it even worse. He is dealing with agents and trying to cram as many interviews as possible into the ten days the producers will be in the UK. This proves to be a monumental task. The Herculean effort pays off and interviews are scheduled with Mollie Sugden, Frank Thornton, Patricia Routledge, Geoffrey Hughes, Lenny Henry, Dawn French, Ardal O'Hanlon, Chris Barrie, Prunella Scales, Andrew Sachs and more.

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Tapes of these interviews eventually arrive on my doorstep. They're a pleasure to watch. *Chef!* star Lenny Henry is high watt energy the whole way and demonstrates an impressive knowledge of all aspects of comedy, including American. Who'd have thought he'd be a big fan of *Friends*? Chris Barrie from *Red Dwarf* also receives an A+ in Britcom history. He proves he's no smeghead when it comes to discussing everything from *Are You Being Served?* to new favorites like *The Office*. Ardal O'Hanlon, from *Father Ted* and *My Hero*, is as self-deprecating, sweet and charming as his most famous character. I have to admit it's a good thing I wasn't there when he was being interviewed. I would've been reduced to jelly, with a goofy grin frozen on my face and a sign reading, "Ditch the wife and marry me."

Andrew Sachs, now an attractive septuagenarian, flashes a devilishly cute grin and talks about how his jacket caught on fire for real during one of *Fawlty Towers*' most memorable scenes. Unlike Manuel, he is extremely articulate and speaks English beautifully.

Patricia Routledge is also quite eloquent, but that's to be expected from someone who studied English. She looks wonderful, despite some rumors concerning her health.

Every one of interviewees provides priceless gems and insights, so I throw my hands up and say, "Can you give us about three hours? A four-part mini-series maybe?" Argh. Still, I press on.

WEEKS THREE AND FOUR

Bruises show up as it officially becomes time for me to start beating my head against the wall. At this point it's uncertain who'll be hosting the show. Dawn French is a possibility so I begin writing with her voice in my head, eating loads of chocolate for inspiration and, of course, research purposes. (Tough gig, this.) I begin singing the theme to *The Vicar of Dibley* in the shower rather than my usual selection of heavy-metal classics. The cat is temporarily able to quit covering his ears.

Things seem to be moving along well and a first draft is finished. I've got the major stars covered with brief biographical tidbits and clips of their best moments. I think it's all on course.

WEEK FIVE

So what the HELL do I know?

Oh dear. First drafts always go through changes, but we're talking a major overhaul worthy of an episode of *Changing Rooms*. And I have roughly the same amount of time to accomplish those changes.

Penelope Keith has agreed to host the special. This major coup is wonderful news. She will be fabulous. The bad news is that to accommodate her schedule the shooting will take place earlier than expected. This means a completed script earlier than anticipated. Ruh roh.

Every minute counts. I eat in front of the computer. I cry in front of the computer. I pray for divine intervention. Guess where? In front of the computer. I call the medical supply store to get an IV drip (dubbed the "espresso express") for a constant flow of coffee.

Frustration mounts and my mouth becomes highly unladylike. Good thing computers don't have a personality – mine would now be in therapy dealing with some major self-esteem issues. I answer the phone with a sarcastic "Yeah, what" worthy of Mrs. Raven. I reenact the famous scene from *Fawlty Towers* when Basil beats up his car with a branch. Manage a pretty good job of it, if I do say so myself. Let's just say I'll never have trouble with the neighbors.

WEEK SIX

It's done. God knows how. The IV can finally be removed from my arm.

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The producers go off to record more interviews and the linking spots with Penelope. But I'm unhappy and still want to make changes.

Now here's where the interesting part comes in. There are five of us closely involved in the production. Three of the producers have traveled to England from different locations in the States. That leaves two of us here and we live hundreds of miles apart.

How to coordinate any last-minute suggestions and updates? What if there are questions that need to be answered, as Alistair on *As Time Goes By* would say, like *yesterday*? Staying in close touch becomes crucial. Scintillating e-mails go flying off into cyberspace:

Date: August 17, 2003
To: Producer@funnyladies
From: Michelle Street
Subject: Back in a few minutes

Hey,

Going to Wal-Mart. Back in a few minutes.

Cheers,
Michelle

Yes, modern technology comes to the rescue. It brings five people together in seconds. I can instantaneously send a file and answer any questions from my home across the ocean to the guys in London.

Not only that, you can now direct dial a few numbers and instantly be talking to someone in London. I phone the guys there only to find that they're staying next door to a place where I spent several summers. Is this a great world or what?

WEEK SEVEN

Except for some clip suggestions my part is done and I hand the puppy over to our esteemed director so that he can work his magic. A few weeks later the first cuts of the special are deposited on my doorstep. Penelope is as marvelous as expected, bringing charm and warmth to her hosting duties.

I start to calm down, but still want to go back and change about a hundred things. That's impossible. After a few more permutations, the *Funny Ladies of British Comedy* is almost a fait accompli.

There's only one thing left – get Philip Bretherton and Moira Brooker from *As Time Goes By* to Des Moines, Iowa in the dead of winter to host the virtual pledge special. The trip was a case of good news/bad news, but the duo finally arrive and spend a wonderful couple of days meeting Iowa Britcom fans and hosting the pledge breaks. (See next article.)

So it's over and I hope you enjoy it. Putting the show together was a hard process, but we got there in the end. So tune in as we say, "Let's hear it for the ladies!" and pay tribute to some extraordinarily talented women. Be prepared to laugh at the best moments from Penelope Keith, Patricia Routledge, Dame Judi Dench, Felicity Kendal, Prunella Scales, Stephanie Coles, Dawn French and lots more. There are also new interviews with backstage gossip and reminiscences of their favorite moments. You'll learn about their careers and see who makes *them* laugh. *The Funny Ladies of British Comedy* has this and much more.

EPILOGUE

I'm scheduled to head back to the Betty Ford Clinic soon. Wonder who'll be in the room next to me this time? I'm hoping for Elizabeth Taylor.



AS TIME WENT BY...IN IOWA

Moira Brooker and Philip Bretherton Meet Iowa Britcom Fans and Host the Funny Ladies Pledge Event

By Julius Cain

The Funny Ladies of British Comedy made its broadcast premiere January 10, 2004 on Iowa Public Television and became that network's most successful Britcom pledge event ever. An important part of its success was due to the co-hosts you'll see during the pledge portions of the evening. Joining public television veterans Bill Young and Terry Steel were *As Time Goes By* co-stars Moira Brooker (Judith) and Philip Bretherton (Alistair).

Having stars like Moira and Philip on hand is something relatively new in public television land called a "virtual" pledge special. By carefully crafting the comments and phrasing, the event is made to look like it originates real time from any given public television station when in fact it was taped months earlier and specifically designed to give the national play a localized feel. Neither actor had done anything quite like it before, but they said from day one they were game on.

Philip and Moira first became aware of *Funny Ladies* when they agreed to be interviewed for it. The executive producers were struck both by the passion with which they spoke and by the insight they were able to provide. When approached to take further part by being on air talent for the pledge event, the actors readily agreed. The production team knew they were onto a good thing, a very good thing.

Moira and Philip were to have arrived in Des Moines on Thursday, January 8 in order to give them a day and a half to adjust for the time zone change and to relax a bit in advance of their turn before the camera. But that was not to be. Their departing flight from London was delayed which meant they missed their connecting flight through Dallas. As no other flights were available that evening, they had to settle for spending the night at DFW airport hotel. Another cruel turn came from the airline telling them due to the nature of their delay, they'd have to pay for their own hotel rooms for the evening. The trip was not exactly off to a cheerful start.

When the production crew joined the actors for dinner the night of January 9, there was a question about whether the two would be found rested and ready to go. It would not have been a surprise to find them tired and perhaps a bit cranky, but these two professionals made it through dinner and pre-production discussions beautifully. They each told funny stories from their trip and seemed touched to have been recognized as that lovely couple from *As Time Goes By*.

Moira and Philip generously gave more of themselves than time in front of the cameras. Early Saturday afternoon they did a two-hour luncheon "grip and grin" with major donors of Iowa Public Television along with a half hour question and answer session. Then, on the very heels of that event, they did another forty-five minute question and answer session for members of Iowa Public Television's Britcom Club. While other presentations at the Britcom Club carried forward, they sat at the foot of the studio audience and signed autographs and accommodated photo opportunities for another forty-five minutes before heading back to their hotel for a well-deserved rest before the evening's taping.

When they returned to the studios for makeup and last minute instructions, they were both incredibly relaxed and enjoying the flow of the day. Philip had mentioned in one of the afternoon sessions that his nephew in the UK was a huge fan of the "alternative metal band" Slipknot. That comment was not missed by Iowa Public Television's Executive Director, Daniel K. Miller, who later presented Philip with an official Slipknot lunch box complete with metal drink canister. The band, you see, is from Iowa, and one of its members has a relative at the Des Moines studio who provided Dan with the lunchbox. Philip looked like he had just been given a Golden Globe Award.

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The Thin Blue Line



Rowan Atkinson joins the force in this police comedy

Pity the poor people of Gasforth. They must pray that they never have an emergency because their police force can definitely not be described as a “crack team” of law enforcement officials. The chief is an anal-retentive, by-the-book prig. His underlings include his long-term girlfriend, who is continually frustrated by her boyfriend’s singularly unromantic nature, an effeminate constable who couldn’t intimidate a gnat and a laid-back West Indian who probably wouldn’t be able to chase down a bank-robbing snail. The only saving grace is a young Asian woman who is sharper than the rest of them put together and keen to do some good.

Put these folks in a typical police station and you’ve got the makings of *The Thin Blue Line*, a police comedy starring the incomparable Rowan Atkinson as Inspector Raymond Fowler. The series was created for Atkinson by Ben Elton, who co-wrote the last three seasons of Atkinson’s classic *Blackadder* series and a few episodes of *Mr. Bean*. He knows Atkinson’s strengths better than almost anyone, so he’s able to incorporate plenty of his star’s trademark verbal and physical mannerisms.

Ben Elton was known during the 1980s as being a radical maverick, one of the threesome that created the groundbreaking, anarchic sitcom *The Young Ones*. He has from all appearances mellowed with age. *The Thin Blue Line* is as traditional as they come, inspired by the David Croft/Jimmy Perry classic *Dad’s Army*.

The influence is easy to pick up, especially in the antagonistic relationship between Fowler’s team of police officers and members of the CID. These plain-clothed detectives think that Gasforth is just teeming with terrorism, drug cartels and things that are oh-so-much more important than the regular beat cops. However, they’re sadly deluded and the only really important phone calls they make are to order a pizza. The tension between Fowler and Detective Inspector Grim of the CID (a great, over-the-top performance by David Haig) brings back memories of Captain Mainwaring’s struggles with the ARP warden Hodges.

The *Dad’s Army* influence is even more obvious when you notice that one of the program’s very first shots shows Atkinson emerging from a shop called “Mainwarings.”

Are You Being Served? must also have been an inspiration. In the effeminate constable Goody, Elton has created a character that almost outcamps Mr. Humphries. The twist here is that Goody is in love with his co-worker, the tough and capable Maggie Habib. James Dreyfus gives a breakout, award-winning performance as the endearing Goody. He preens, minces and mugs shamelessly, sometimes coming perilously close to stealing Atkinson’s thunder.

The plots have more to do with the interactions between the characters than the police work itself. Goody does his best to attract Habib. Fowler’s girlfriend tries unsuccessfully to get him to be more romantic. Grim of the CID snubs the people in uniform, makes mountains out of molehills and acts like he’s a television detective, using clichéd phrase like “Go! Go! Go!”

And Fowler, bless his heart, does his best to keep the town of Gasforth safe.

As excellent a writer as Elton is, he does let things down a bit from time to time. The wonderful Rudolph Walker, as the laconic West Indian PC Gladstone, is criminally underused and is too much of a talent to waste. Same goes for Mark Addy, who shows up in the second season as Detective Boyle of the CID. He’s an appealing performer not given enough to do. And any *Blackadder* fan will be able to spot those times when Elton recycles his own gags.

The Thin Blue Line combines a great ensemble with lots of high-energy fun and laughs. As you watch, be just glad that your own local police force is more efficient. Or is it? :)



THE SEARCH FOR BRITAIN'S BEST SITCOM



Which Will End Up at the Top?

The Presidential election isn't the only important vote happening this year. Over in the UK, viewers are casting ballots to select Britain's best sitcom.

The process began last summer when a list was compiled of the top 100 choices. A further vote was taken and that list was then narrowed down to ten. The remaining contenders are: *Fawlty Towers*, *Blackadder*, *The Vicar of Dibley*, *Yes, Prime Minister*, *The Good Life*, *Porridge*, *One Foot in the Grave*, *Dad's Army*, *Only Fools and Horses* and *Open All Hours*

Others in the top twenty were *Father Ted*, *Keeping Up Appearances*, *'Allo 'Allo*, *Last of the Summer Wine*, *Steptoe and Son*, *Men Behaving Badly*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *Red Dwarf*, *The Royle Family* and *Are You Being Served?*

The BBC then asked a UK celebrity to be an "advocate" for each of the Top 10 shows. In a series of one-hour specials they provided an argument for why their particular choice should be voted best sitcom.

The first of these programs made a very strong case for *Blackadder*. It was hosted by journalist and political commentator John Sergeant. He went through a list of ten reasons why *Blackadder* is the best ever UK sitcom. Along with his list, this fascinating documentary contained new interviews with co-writers Richard Curtis and Ben Elton plus a number of the stars, including Tony Robinson, Miranda Richardson, Tim McInnerney, and Hugh Laurie. Sadly, new interview footage with Rowan Atkinson was nowhere to be seen.

The special provided enormous insight into the program. There was wonderful archived footage showing a read-through rehearsal and Tony Robinson explained how Atkinson's trademark over-enunciation is due mainly to the fact that he has a stutter. There was also the interesting tidbit that co-writer Ben Elton made Baldrick's favorite vegetable a turnip when he should have more actually chosen the more "thingy-shaped" but

less amusingly named parsnip. The props people, however, were able to create a clever hybrid.

The other specials were equally good. Actress/presenter Ulrika Johnson spoke on behalf of *The Good Life* by saying that it proved you could set a sitcom in suburbia with a witty, wordy and gentle script and still pull in over 20,000,000 viewers.

Political satirist, producer and writer Armando Iannucci was the perfect choice to make the case for *Yes, Prime Minister*. He pointed out that no other sitcom in history had been so thoroughly researched since real insiders anonymously gave writers Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn secrets about Whitehall and how it really works. Iannucci called *YPM* a "crash course in contemporary political studies."

Writer/comedian/producer Rowland Rivron then championed *One Foot in the Grave*. He praised the bravery of the show in having a lead character like Victor Meldrew and then killing him off. He also mentioned that *OFITG* is also brave because it probably has the highest number of animal fatalities ever in a sitcom.

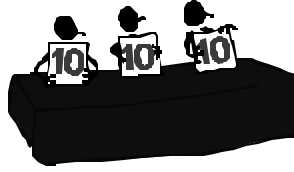
The case for *Fawlty Towers* was made by comedian Jack Dee. "A work of art," he said, "with more laughs per minute" than other sitcom ever created as well as the longest running time. He also praised it for knowing when to stop – only twelve episodes and no Christmas specials.

It's not over yet. The last of the specials will be shown March 13th and then the final results will be tallied. My prediction is that either *Fawlty* or *Only Fools and Horses* will emerge the victor. The latter is not as well known in the States but has been a staple on British television since the 70s. Don't worry – when the winner is decided, count on *The Insider* to let you know.



The 20 Greatest Moments in British Comedy:

Your Editor's Picks



Well, well...I set myself a task, didn't I? Out of the many, many great Britcom moments over the years how could I choose 20? It wasn't easy, but here they are:

20.) MY HERO – ARNIE MEETS MRS. RAVEN

My Hero not only features the wonderful Ardal O'Hanlon as superhero George Sunday, but also boasts one of the best supporting characters in recent memory: the sarcastic, venom-spewing health center receptionist Mrs. Raven. Sparks – and insults – fly when Mrs. Raven meets her match in George's equally caustic cousin Arnie. What else can this lead to but love?

19.) ARE YOU BEING SERVED? – MR. LUCAS “SAVES” MRS. SLOCOMBE IN THE EPISODE FIRE PRACTICE.

AYBS? is full of physical gags, but few are better than when Mr. Lucas has to lift Mrs. Slocombe over his shoulder during a practice fire drill. His attempts to keep her aloft are classic. Kudos to both Trevor Bannister and Mollie Sugden for a priceless sequence that makes you laugh no matter how many times you see it.

18.) FATHER TED – DOUGAL AND TED SING FOR IRELAND AT THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST IN THE EPISODE SONG FOR EUROPE.

Father Ted Crilly may be a man of faith, but he still dreams of fame and fortune. An appearance at the Eurovision song contest may just be the ticket. Sadly, the song he and Father Dougal write – with its stolen melody and lame lyrics about “My Lovely Horse” - causes the competition to end on a sour note.

17.) LAST OF THE SUMMER WINE – COMPO IS LAID TO REST.

When star Bill Owen died, it could not have been easy to write him out of the series. Compo was one of the original and most beloved characters in this long-running sitcom. Yet in a series of three episodes, writer Roy Clarke managed a remarkably poignant and funny tribute to the little man in the wooly hat.

16.) KEEPING UP APPEARANCES – HYACINTH IS DRENCHED WHILE BOATING ON THE RIVER.

As Hyacinth Bucket, the usually dignified Patricia Routledge does whatever is needed to get a laugh. Allowing herself to be drenched in water at the end of *WATERSIDE SUPPER WITH RIPARIAN ENTERTAINMENTS* goes above and beyond the call of the duty but results in a hysterical moment. The “Queen wave” as she passes her family on the shore is a great end to this classic moment.

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15.) RED DWARF – KRYTEN HELPS LISTER GET THE KEBAB OUT OF HIS PANTS.

Sometimes the cheapest gags are the best. In POLYMORPH, Lister goes to eat a kebab that mysteriously changes shape and ends up down his pants. Kryten tries to help him remove the kebab and Rimmer finds the pair in what you would call a very compromising position.

14.) ARE YOU BEING SERVED? – MRS. SLOCOMBE’S GREEK WEDDING

When Mrs. Slocombe needs a last-minute replacement for her Greek fiancé, who it turns out was already married, her co-workers step in and give her a wedding to remember. They also give her a substitute groom to remember in the form of Mr. Humphries. One of the better *AYBS*? “dress up and dance” numbers.

13.) KEEPING UP APPEARANCES – HYACINTH AND ONSLOW DANCE ABOARD THE QE 2.

Hyacinth has always avoided association with her brother-in-law Onslow. Yet when he takes the spotlight as the winner of a free cruise on the QE 2 she can’t help but improve her social standing on the ship by shaking a leg with him.

12.) VICAR OF DIBLEY – GERALDINE FALLS FOR SIMON

Geraldine Grainger puts the needs of her parishioners first, even when she has a handsome man waiting for her. However, once everyone else is taken care of, Geraldine allows herself a memorable night of passion with David Horton’s brother Simon. The look – and hair – on Dawn French as she comes downstairs in the morning is a riot.

11.) ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE – VICTOR’S DEMISE

When it was decided that *One Foot in the Grave* had run its course, writer David Renwick bravely decided to kill off its main character, the iconic Victor Meldrew. That way there could be absolutely no discussion of another series. The scene of Victor’s death is not funny, but perfectly done. The image of his hat floating in the puddle and his arm falling to the ground is heartbreaking. The rest of the episode is sheer perfection as well, including the montage of Victor’s greatest moments at the end.

10.) AS TIME GOES BY – LIONEL PROPOSES TO JEAN

It takes almost forty years to happen, but Lionel finally proposes to Jean. Writer Bob Larbey emphasizes the fact that love can come at any age – even when you’re so old that, as in Lionel’s case, getting down on one knee can cause some problems.

9.) FAWLTY TOWERS – BASIL WAITS ON THE GERMANS

Who can forget the classic “Don’t mention the war!” and Cleese somewhat reprising the classic silly walk from his Monty Python days? (Interesting that the goosetep is preceded by the line, “Right, I’ll do the silly walk,” as if Cleese is acknowledging a part of his past that he’ll never get rid of.) If this doesn’t make you laugh until you snort you need treatment.

8.) KEEPING UP APPEARANCES – HYACINTH CLIMBS OVER WALLS TO GET TO DAISY’S HOUSE

Elizabeth is being neighborly and gives Hyacinth a lift to Daisy’s house. Hyacinth doesn’t want Elizabeth to know that her sister lives in a hovel, so she has her drop her off a few streets away. Hyacinth then makes her way to Daisy’s house by climbing over walls and creeping through backyards. A great sequence made all the more remarkable by fact that, with no disrespect intended, Patricia Routledge wasn’t exactly a spring chicken when she performed it.

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7.) MONTY PYTHON'S FLYING CIRCUS – DEAD PARROTT SKETCH

Now, how many different ways did *you* learn to express that something has passed on thanks to this sketch? I know I picked up a few. An exquisite example of what the Pythons would refer to as a “Roget’s Thesaurus” sketch, where they would go to the thesaurus and fill a skit with different ways of saying the same thing. Years later, Cleeve and Palin would perform this at an Amnesty International benefit and it still had the ability to crack them up.

6.) YES, PRIME MINISTER – SIR HUMPHREY IS LOCKED OUT

Actually, there are a number of great moments in the episode THE KEY. Hacker takes away Sir Humphrey’s key to Number 10 following a power struggle with another of Hacker’s political advisors. Sir Humphrey’s increasingly frantic attempts to regain access to Number 10 and the PM is a tour-de-force for co-star Nigel Hawthorne.

5.) BLACKADDER GOES FORTH – THEY FINALLY GO OVER THE TOP

Blackadder was known for its sarcasm, its similes and for sometimes plunging into toilet humor. Yet the ending – with Edmund and the troops going over the top to certain death – was as poignant and heartbreaking as they come. Producer John Lloyd is said to be responsible for the idea of the final shot of the battlefield turning into a field of poppies.

4.) GOOD NEIGHBORS – MARGO TRIES TO HELP OUT.

Margo Leadbetter, played in a star-making turn by Penelope Keith, is one of British comedy’s most enduringly funny characters. She is prim, starchy, and admittedly not someone who can take a joke. So when she slips in the mud while trying to help Tom and Barbara bring in their crop, her pride is wounded in a hilarious manner.

3.) BLACKADDER II – LORD FLASHEART STEALS “BOB”

Poor Edmund. Just when he’s just found the love of his life in the form of “Bob,” a girl he *thought* was a boy, his wedding day is ruined by the arrival of his best man, Lord Flasheart. Flash is a force of nature who makes all the women swoon. He ends up stealing Edmund’s thunder – and his bride. Rik Mayall absolutely chews the scenery as Lord Flasheart. Woof!

2.) ARE YOU BEING SERVED? - GERMAN WEEK DANCE

Are You Being Served? has a number of fun production numbers, but the site of the Grace Brothers staff in lederhosen (especially Mr. Humphries!) is hands down the silliest and the best. Captain Peacock and a drunk Mrs. Slocombe taking it all a bit too seriously and getting into a slapping match makes it all the more perfect.

1.) FAWLTY TOWERS – BASIL BEATS UP HIS CAR

I’m sure we’ll all had times in our lives when we’ve wanted to reenact this scene, right? Basil Fawlty usually takes out his frustrations on the hapless Manuel, but when his car stalls and almost causes the ruination of Fawlty Towers’ first gourmet night, he finds a branch and lets the car have it. Of course, all of this could’ve been avoided had he listened to Sybil and not tried to fix the car himself. A wonderful scene that beautifully sums up the character of Basil and all that is great about *Fawlty Towers*.

**NOW THAT I’VE HAD MY SAY, LET ME KNOW YOUR OWN PERSONAL FAVORITES.
CONTACT INFORMATION IS ON PAGE 2.**



The Insider Salutes:



JOHN ESMONDE AND BOB LARBHEY

The Story of British Comedy's Dynamic Writing Duo

From the comfortable suburbia of *Good Neighbors* to the darker world of *Mulberry*, writers John Esmonde and Bob Larbey have created some of British comedy's best-loved programs. We know their shows, but what of the writers themselves?

The story of their prolific partnership is one of how persistence and talent paid off. They first met at grammar school in Clapham, where Larbey was three years ahead of Esmonde. During a school trip to Switzerland the duo discovered that they shared a similar sense of humor and forged a long-lasting friendship.

Both served in the military. After service, they found themselves in a situation similar to that of their most famous character, Tom Good. Stuck in dead-end, unfulfilling jobs they would often meet for lunchtime gripe sessions about work. There had to be a better way to make a living.

How about writing? Their mutual enthusiasm for radio and comedy revues inspired them to come up with some material of their own. They would work at John's house in the evenings, but their early creations resulted in nothing but rejection.

Finally they sold their first work. It was a very short skit consisting of an encounter between an elderly man and woman.

MAN: I love you desperately, Gladys, but we can never become man and wife.

GLADYS: Why?

MAN: Because I'm a mod and you're a rocker.

Not exactly memorable stuff, but maybe you had to be there. Still, it was a start and gave them hope that maybe one day they'd be able to ditch the nine-to-five routine.

Their television break came when they began contributing short bits to the long-running *Dick Emery Show*. They kept their day jobs for about the first year, but this took its toll on them physically in the form of exhaustion. Since they were getting positive feedback on their writing, they asked themselves if it wasn't time to take that big leap and become full-time writers. They decided to take the risk.

It was thrilling to be able to do what they'd always wanted, but life without the security of a paycheck wasn't easy. Larbey's wife was especially supportive, taking over as the family breadwinner when necessary.

Luck came in the form of a producer for BBC radio, who asked if they were interested in doing a half-hour comedy show.

They readily accepted the challenge. The result was *Spare a Copper*, a comedy which, as its title suggests, is about a cop. The series lasted two seasons and in the process

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Esmonde and Larbey learned a lot about how to structure thirty minutes of comedy as opposed to the short skits they'd been doing. They also learned a lot about how to create a character. But more important, the success of the series gave them confidence in their ability to make their livings as writers.

In contrast to some writing partnerships, Esmonde and Larbey split script responsibility in half and worked in the same office. In an exclusive interview with *The Insider* back in March of 2001, Larbey explained their process:

"We always wrote together in the same room. I've heard of pairs of writers who do scenes each and then meet up and put them together, but that never appealed to us. We rented a series of disgusting little offices and just used to go to work--sit in the same room, talk a lot, drink a lot of coffee, and ad-lib dialogue. We used to get the story fairly straight first, and then start to ad-lib dialogue. And that was it. Ad-lib it and write it down, and try to remember what you've just been laughing at. That's the hardest part."

They rarely disagreed on things, but decided early on that if one of them felt very strongly that a scene wasn't working or a line of dialogue should be taken out, then it would be gone.

They were helped out in the early days by people such as Marty Feldman and famed comedy writer/producer Barry Took, who would give them constructive, positive criticism.

With the success of *Spare Me a Copper* on radio, Esmonde and Larbey decided to challenge themselves further with a television sitcom. Their first effort was called *Room at the Bottom*, the plot of which revolved around maintenance men working at a manufacturing plant.

It was shown as part of *Comedy Playhouse*, a series that aired a different pilot every week. If a pilot was deemed strong enough, a complete season would then be commissioned. (Comedy Playhouse was also responsible for other classics such as *Are You Being Served?*)

Room at the Bottom was indeed successful enough to warrant the production of an entire season of seven episodes. It wasn't picked up for a second season, but it was valuable experience and a program they both look back on with pride.

In 1968 the pair scored their first big hit with the comedy *Please, Sir!* It starred John Alderton as a young teacher coping with a class of kids who knew more about life than he did.

Unlike many shows, which take several seasons to become established and gather an audience, *Please, Sir!* was an instant hit and ran for a total of 56 episodes. A sequel, called *The Fenn Street Gang*, ran for an additional 49 episodes.

It was only with the success of these two series that Esmonde and Larbey realized they'd made it. There would be no returning to a boring nine- to-five routine.

Until, of course, they dealt with the subject in *Good Neighbors*. Since both of them had suffered through stifling, dead-end jobs, it was something they could write about from experience. Plus, Larbey had just turned a crucial age. As he told *The Insider*:

"I think it was a good idea. We started with the premise of somebody reaching his fortieth birthday, in this case the character [Tom Good]. People think of it as one of those milestone ages, the "Oh, God, what have I done with my life? What do I do about it?" That was the premise."

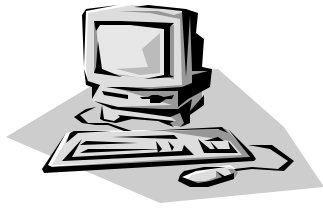
They knew that Tom was going to chuck his job and the question became what would he do then? At first they considered having him build a yacht and sail around the world, but a subject that was trendy at the time turned out to be a better idea.

"Then we added the self-sufficiency, which seemed a good idea," Larbey said. "It started slowly--bad reviews and low audiences, and then somewhere in the second series it just took off and flew. And it sort of passed into legend for some reason."

Good Neighbors (or *The Good Life*, as it was known in the UK) passed into legend for many good reasons. There was the brilliant ensemble of Richard Briers, Felicity Kendal, Penelope Keith and the late Paul Eddington. The chemistry among them has rarely been equaled in television sitcoms. But the majority of the credit must go to Esmonde and Larbey, who made a number of smart moves in the creation and writing of the series.

First, a premise that almost anyone can relate to. Who hasn't dreamed of being their own boss? Most people,

(continued on page 17)



SPOTTED ON THE INTERNET

Reviews by David Darryl Bibb

The Unofficial Guide to Fawlty Towers

<http://www.btinternet.com/~c.tomlinson/fawltly1.html>

This site hasn't been updated in a while but there are a few fun things that make it stand out as an original. Along with the obligatory history of the show and some interesting trivia, there is a "Touch of Class Game." It's basically a simple game of tic-tac-toe during which the player tries to save Basil's coin collection from being stolen by Lord Melbury. There are also links to other sites and newspaper articles relating to *Fawlty*.

Could've used a bit more work on the design, but overall this is a site worth visiting.

Rating: 4 mouse clicks

The Thin Blue Line

<http://www.rowanatkinson.org/TBL.htm>

This page is part of the excellent Rowan Atkinson Information Gateway site. You can download the show's hummable theme tune (by *Blackadder* and *Vicar of Dibley* songwriter Howard Goodall), listen to a snippet of an interview with Stephen Fry, who guest-starred on the show, get links to episodes guides and lots more.

Rating: 4 out of 5 mouse clicks

Penelope Keith Page

<http://www.brit-brat.com/goodlife/goodlife322.htm>

There isn't a biography or much else here, but there are loads of pictures of the Britcom stalwart (and host of *The Funny Ladies of British Comedy*) Penelope Keith. The pictures range from Penny with John Inman, with her

husband, Rodney Timson, Penelope with her Corgi plus a nice photo of her with Peter Bowles. Part of a larger site devoted to *Good Neighbors*, this is fun to look at and a reminder of just how much this talented woman has done in the course of her long career.

Rating: 3 1/2 mouse clicks

Moira Brooker and Philip Bretherton

<http://atgbcentral.com/JUDITH.html>

<http://atgbcentral.com/ALISTAIR.html>

These pages don't tell you much about the actors themselves, but they do a nice job of describing the characters of Judith and Alistair. Also suggested - go to the site's homepage (<http://www.atgbcentral.com>) and click on the link called Curiosities. This will bring you to loads of articles about the various actors on *ATGB*, including Moira and Philip.

Rating: 4 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.
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Prunella Scales (cont'd. from page 1)

She was educated at a prestigious boarding school for girls in Eastbourne and at seventeen went to study at the Old Vic Theater School. It was then off to New York for more study at the Herbert Berghof Studios with the legendary teacher Uta Hagen. Given this background, it's understandable why she has become legendary for agonizing over every last detail of her characters.

Like many actors of her generation Prunella developed an ability to do a wide range of characters by appearing in repertory theater. She played part after part in a variety of productions. This experience would help her hone her craft and come in handy when her career began to blossom. The theater also became a passion to which she has returned often during the course of her working life.

Prunella's early television performances included appearances as waitresses and barmaids, causing her to joke once that she's going to call the first volume of her autobiography *Familiar Trays*. She played Eileen Hughes on the long-running soap *Coronation Street* and in 1963 teamed up with Richard Briers for a sitcom entitled *Marriage Lines*. The show had been written with Briers in mind but it made a star of Prunella as well.

She played Kate Starling, a young wife who loves her new husband but becomes increasingly frustrated by domestic servitude. Her husband, on the other hand, also misses the bond with the lads. They suffer through the normal problems that plague young couples, but manage to make a success of their marriage. During the course of the series they also become the parents of two children.

The show was an enormous success and also adapted into a radio series that ran for twenty-six episodes.

Perhaps part of the reason for Prunella's success as Kate was due to the fact that part of the plotlines reflected her own experiences. The same year *Marriage Lines* debuted she married the actor Timothy West wearing a hat borrowed from the wife of her future *Fawlty* co-star Andrew Sachs. During the show's fifth season, Kate's pregnancy was written in to accommodate Prunella's own pregnancy. Their son Sam was born in June of 1966 and is now carving out his own career as a successful actor. (Among other things, he appeared as a newlywed who rows with his wife while on their Parisian honeymoon in an episode of *As Time Goes By*.)

A few years later Prunella would play another wife – one who was very different from Kate Starling. Sybil Fawcett is demanding, shrewish, and with a look that her husband Basil believes can kill a man at ten paces. She can stop her husband cold just by saying his name and has this uncanny ability of knowing exactly when he's trying to pull one over on her. Yet Basil still schemes, only to get caught and face the wrath of Sybil.

It is easy to give Cleeve and co-writer Connie Booth the lion's share of the credit for *Fawlty's* success, but Prunella's contribution to the show simply cannot be overestimated. Cleeve and Booth had written Sybil one way, but during rehearsals Prunella was doing the character in a different manner. Cleeve and Booth soon realized that what Prunella was doing was better.

Her main contribution was the laugh. That braying sound Basil described as "someone machine-gunning a seal" was developed by Prunella and became one of Sybil's most memorable trademarks. It is also a tribute to Prunella's skill that she took two words and turned them into one of British comedy's most famous catchphrases. Who can forget the sight of her sitting up in bed, eating bonbons and talking to Audrey on the phone, saying over and over again, "I know....I know..."

What makes her performance all the more amazing is that Prunella is nothing like Sybil. First of all, her normal speaking voice is almost a whisper and it's impossible to imagine that ear-splitting "BASIL!" coming from her mouth. She's also a very mild-mannered woman. It's hard to conceive of her going after anyone with an umbrella as she did in one of *Fawlty's* best scenes.

Yet somehow this seemingly timid, serious woman created one of comedy's greatest shrews. Cleeve once said the key to Basil is that he is absolutely terrified of Sybil and Prunella certainly makes you believe it. The beauty of her performance is that you also believe her those times when she's all sweetness and light, pacifying a guest after Basil has made a mess of things.

Included in those twelve episodes are more priceless moments than one can count. When she thinks Basil may be betting on the horses against her wishes, she casually tells him, "you know what I'll do if I find out." "You'll have to sew 'em back on first" is Basil's reply. When she finds Basil unknowingly groping an attractive guest (he's in the other room and thinks he's turning on a light switch), she shows no signs of jealousy. "If you're

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going to grope a girl, have the gallantry to stay in the room while you're doing it" she says.

Sybil can match Basil during verbal altercations but she's also not above showing her anger in a physical manner. Basil is the recipient of a number of slaps from his better half, but at least he can turn around and take out his aggression on Manuel.

Those twelve episodes made Prunella a Britcom icon, but all the attention paid to one single role is a bit frustrating to her. She says she's had people come up and say things like, "Sybil Fawly...you'll never have a better part." Those sorts of remarks depress her and Prunella says if she truly believed them she'd "give up the business." She had a career before *Fawly Towers* and she's certainly had one since.

In between the two seasons of *Fawly* she played a thieving wife in a short-lived sitcom called *Mr. Big*. She also did film work. In 1978 she appeared with Gregory Peck and Sir Laurence Olivier in the film *The Boys from Brazil*. That same year she joined an all-star cast including Dudley Moore, Peter Cook and Penelope Keith for an update of the Sherlock Holmes classic *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Like Judi Dench, Prunella has also had great success playing Queens. In 1980 she took on a role that she would play on and off for many years. In a stage show entitled *An Evening with Queen Victoria* she embodied one of Britain's most famous monarchs. In 2003 she did a television program called *Waiting for Victoria*, in which she performed some of Victoria's writings and took viewers behind the scenes as she researched the role.

She would play another monarch in 1992, giving a universally admired performance as Queen Elizabeth II in Alan Bennett's *A Question of Attribution*. She originated the role on stage, which was the first time a reigning monarch had been portrayed in a theatrical production. In 1992 a television movie of the play was made.

The plot revolves around the activities of Sir Anthony Blunt, who works as Director of the Courtauld Institute and is also a Russian spy. Prunella's performance is a tribute to her dedication to detail. She looks every inch the Queen and brings a humor and humanity to the role that you just suspect might be an accurate rendering of the real person.

So perfect was her personification of the Queen that when Prunella was awarded a CBE (Commander of the

British Empire) Her Majesty said, "I suppose you think you ought to be doing this."

Prunella is also remembered for her role in the 1986 miniseries *Mapp and Lucia*. She stars alongside the formidable Geraldine McEwan as Miss Elizabeth Mapp, who fights for control of society life in the small town of Tilling-on-Sea. Though polite to each other on the surface, Mapp and Lucia are bitter rivals who engage in devious plots against each other.

Two years later, Prunella began her longest-lasting sitcom role. *After Henry* originated on radio, with Prunella playing Sarah France, a fortyish woman who has to cope with life after becoming a widow. She shares a house with her mother and teenage daughter, who do not help matters.

The series began as a radio program but was transferred to television and became enormously popular. Prunella's gossipy, manipulative mother was played by the wonderful Joan Sanderson, who made a memorable appearance in *Fawly Towers* as the hard-of-hearing Mrs. Richards.

Along with theater work, Prunella's other roles have encompassed period pieces (1997's *Emma*, for which she insisted that her teeth be colored yellow to better suit her character of Mrs. Bates) to voice work for children's animations. She also adores radio and teamed up with Hyacinth Bucket herself, Patricia Routledge, for a series called *Ladies of Letters*.

The series is a collection of letters sent between two women who meet at the wedding of the daughter of Irene, the character played by Prunella. The two dance a drunken tango and after they return to their respective homes they get to know each other well through correspondence.

Along with a very busy career, Prunella takes the time to teach acting workshops and has also directed stage productions. This is all part of her dedication to the craft she clearly loves.

So the next time you hear her infamous cry of "BASIL!" remember that there is much more to Prunella Scales than Sybil. Simply put, there are actors and then there are actors with a capital "A." The talented Prunella Scales is definitely one of the latter.

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Esmonde and Larbey (cont'd. from page 12)

however, don't have the nerve of a Tom Good to make it actually happen. A large number of people spend years at an unfulfilling job, so it's a pleasure to live vicariously through him. Some fans, however, were inspired by the series and actually went out to become self-sufficient.

Then there was the relationship between the Goods and the Leadbetters. Setting up the two couples as friends was much more effective than if they'd had an adversarial relationship, though there was always just enough conflict to keep things interesting.

This also allowed Esmonde and Larbey to develop Margo and Jerry into strong characters in their own right.

It would've been easy to write Margo solely as a caricature of a middle-class snob or as a shrewish, disapproving harridan, but Esmonde and Larbey turned her into more. Add in Penelope Keith's stellar performance and Margo became one of the most popular characters in Britcom history. Same for her husband Jerry. Esmonde and Larbey made him more than just another Richard Bucket-style henpecked husband.

Jerry usually – but not always – kowtowed to his wife while Margo definitely was snobbish and often disapproved of what the Goods were doing. Yet any tension between the neighbors was offset by acts of true friendship. Who can forget the sight of Margo slipping in the mud as she helped Tom and Barbara bring in a crop that was on the verge of destruction because of a bad storm? Who was there to help when the pig gave birth? Margo and Jerry.

The shoe was sometimes on the other foot. Tom and Barbara provided the Leadbetters with a scaled-down Christmas to remember after Margo's "Christmas in a van" couldn't be delivered on time. Tom and Barbara were also there to support Margo when she made her debut in the music society production of *The Sound of Music*.

Another smart move Esmonde and Larbey made was having the Goods try self-sufficiency in suburbia. Had the setting been a rural area it really wouldn't have created the same kind of tension or had the same kind of impact.

Good Neighbors ran for four seasons and the final regular season episode – called Anniversary – ended the series on a combination of sadness and optimism. The Good's

home is burglarized on the same day Tom is celebrating his 42nd birthday. The Goods and the Leadbetters are at first devastated and for a moment it looks like Tom and Barbara will have to abandon the idea of self-sufficiency. However, despite this temporary setback Tom and Barbara refuse to give up and the couples share a toast to "the good life."

"Anniversary" was seen by over 12 million viewers but there were two more shows to come. A 1977 Christmas special and a special episode, called "When I'm 64" filmed in front of one of the show's biggest fans: the Queen.

Perhaps Esmonde and Larbey's greatest achievement with *Good Neighbors* was that more than any other program of its era it gives a portrait of British life at that point in time. It captured the dreams as well as the frustrations of many Britons. Tom wanted a better life while Margo had the nerve to stand up to the rates man and be the voice of the "silent majority."

In a few years things would start to change as Mrs. Thatcher was elected and disillusioned British youth loudly began to proclaim their displeasure with her.

While *Good Neighbors* was still airing, Esmonde and Larbey reached into their pasts for material to create another sitcom. *Get Some In!* was based on their military service. It proved another hit and ran for five seasons, giving Robert Lindsay his first major role.

The 70s were a busy time for the duo and their output also included some things that didn't quite gel. Richard Briers and Michael Gambon starred in *The Other One*, in which Briers played a habitual liar. The British public seemed unable to accept their beloved Briers as a bad guy, so the series didn't go over well. However, it remains one of Esmonde and Larbey's favorites.

In the early 80s they decided to take a bit of a break. Esmonde went to spend time in Spain while Larbey bought a new home and, suddenly strapped with a hefty mortgage, found himself in need of some cash. He spoke to his agent, who told him the obvious: "You're a comedy writer. Write a comedy."

It was odd for Larbey to work without his long-time partner, but his first solo project became a big hit.

A Fine Romance stars Judi Dench (before she was a Dame) as translator Laura Dalton and her late husband

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Michael Williams as Mike Selway, a scruffy landscape gardener. This sweet romantic comedy follows the pair as they are set up on a blind date by Laura's sister and, despite their initial reservations about each other, slowly but surely fall in love.

Larbey's excellent script and the winning combination of Dench (in her first sitcom) and Williams made this program a smash that lasted for four seasons.

The final episode of *A Fine Romance* was transmitted in 1984. That same year Larbey reteamed with both Esmonde and Briers for *Ever Decreasing Circles*.

The character Briers plays, that of Martin Bryce, is on some levels similar to Tom Good. They both feel the need to be efficient, organized and in control. They are both more than a bit self-absorbed and can be incredibly insensitive to the needs of their better half. On the other hand, both Tom and Martin have intentions that are good.

Martin wants to help his community and in his zeal heads up about every conceivable local committee. He has a small office (well, a closet) in his house that is constantly abuzz with the sound of his duplicating machine printing out meeting agendas or other committee business.

Yet his singular focus on doing good causes Martin to become an incredible bore. His wife wants to go to see a famed pianist while Martin prefers his meetings or studying up on various esoteric subjects.

Every protagonist needs an antagonist and Esmonde/Larbey give Martin a wonderful one in the form of Paul Ryman, played by Peter Egan. Paul is everything Martin is not – supremely confident and seemingly able to have everything fall together effortlessly. Paul is adept at his profession as a hairdresser, good at sports and apparently has no problem with the ladies.

Most of all, Paul is good at getting under Martin's skin. While others take a shine to the charismatic newcomer, Martin is driven to distraction in an attempt to find out something – ANYTHING - that he's better at than Paul.

The rivalry between the two men is beautifully rendered with Briers giving one of his best performances. Along with Egan, Penelope Wilton provides able support as Martin's wife Ann. Martin is too clueless to sense the growing attraction between Paul and Ann, but like Barbara Good, Ann is a faithful wife who stays with a man that other women might have left.

Esmonde and Larbey's scripts beautifully capture the spirit of being British and of being an "everyman" – a normal guy dealing with every day problems. Sure, Martin makes the most ordinary molehills into mountains, but as frustrating as he is, you root for him in the end. Being the smart writers that they are, Esmonde and Larbey also show that Paul's life is not as rosy as it first appears.

As *Ever Decreasing Circles* began to reach an end, Esmonde and Larbey brought out their next effort, *Brush Strokes*, with Karl Howman as a wisecracking womanizer who works as a house painter. Howman would later star in *Mulberry*, playing an apprentice Grim Reaper who develops a soft spot for the woman he is supposed to be escorting into the next world.

The woman in question in the cantankerous Miss Farnaby, played by Geraldine McEwan. In an attempt to make her last days pleasant, Mulberry gets a job as her servant and his charm eventually wears down the elderly woman's crusty exterior.

His affection for her grows to the point where he's hesitant to do the job he's been sent to do. This is frowned upon by his father, the Grim Reaper who appears to his son as a mysterious black figure.

Mulberry lasted thirteen episodes and was a good example of how Esmonde and Larbey's writing could display an incredible amount of depth. It also showed them experimenting with the sitcom formula, dealing with somewhat dark subject matter in a humorous way and incorporating plenty of fantasy and whimsy.

Esmonde and Larbey have been criticized in some circles as being too safe and cozy, but their later work like *Ever Decreasing Circles* and *Mulberry* show that this criticism is to a large extent unfair.

Following one more collaboration (1995's *Down to Earth*, also starring Briers), Esmonde and Larbey decided to call their partnership quits. It was entirely amicable, due mainly to Esmonde's desire to spend more time in Spain. He still lives there and concentrates on writing novels.

By this time, Larbey had already begun to write another enormously popular Britcom. It was somewhat similar in premise to his earlier *A Fine Romance* and one of its stars was also the same.

The idea for *As Time Goes By* was brought to Larbey by

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the Theater of Comedy production company and they asked him to see what he could do with it. The premise – of two former lovers reuniting after almost forty years – was right up Larbey’s alley and the dream casting of Dame Judi Dench as Jean Pargetter and Geoffrey Palmer as Lionel Hardcastle turned Larbey’s words into gold.

For the first few seasons, the plot revolved around whether or not Lionel and Jean would get back together. As Larbey confessed to *The Insider*, “You can do just so much with two people sort of dancing around each other--and the audience knowing that the outcome was going to be a happy one. I think the reason that I went on was that they were all so good in it and enjoyed it, and I liked the characters that I’d written. It was a happy time, and we said let’s go on, let’s make it a character comedy.”

And that he did, keeping the show fresh after the original “will they or won’t they?” question was resolved. The other characters – especially Moira Brooker as Judith and Philip Bretherton as Alistair – went through their own relationship roller coaster and there was the wonderful romance of Lionel’s octogenarian father Rocky, who marries his child bride, the septuagenarian Madge.

Larbey was also able to throw in some great supporting characters, such as the lovable Mrs. Flack, a very conscientious secretary who nonetheless drove Lionel crazy when she was hired to help him with his book.

Despite his success as a solo writer, Larbey admits that working without a partner is less fun. There is no one to bounce ideas off of nor is there a partner to laugh with if something is funny. He also admits that when he and Esmonde worked together there was much more planning and outlining involved in the scripts. On his own, Larbey says he thinks in broad terms, figures out the ending and just goes from there.

Larbey’s recent scripts contain the same strengths as the work he did with Esmonde. They got laughs without resorting to coarse language or cheap laughs. They never repeated themselves and, although not every one of their collaborations proved to be a hit, they weren’t afraid to experiment. They created characters everyone could relate to and let the laughter flow naturally from the characters and the situation rather than an endless stream of artificial one-liners. Together and solo, the work of John Esmonde and Bob Larbey has made the world of British comedy a much richer place. For that, we here at *The Insider* salute them and say thank you, gentlemen.



As Time Went By...continued from p. 6)

As for Moira, she very cleverly responded that a tasteful set of diamond earrings would suit her fine as a souvenir of the event. Lamentably, there was no spare pair of diamond earrings to be had around the studio that evening, but she reacted happily when told they she would be treated to a root beer float after the evening’s taping. Classy lady.

It took only a few minutes of the first pledge break of the evening for Moira and Philip to reach full stride. They deftly delivered the points requested of them by the producer and told one wonderful story after another about their work on the series with Dame Judi Dench and Geoffrey Palmer.

In fact, when you tune in you’ll find out the original title of *As Time Goes By* and how the cast felt about it, learn a few facts about the show’s legendary producer/director Sydney Lotterby, and discover the identity of the biggest prankster among the cast of *As Time Goes By*. You’ll also find out who inspired Moira to become an actress and hear Philip deliver a pledge pitch a la Alistair. Hey hey! All great stuff.

The madly ringing phones proved that Philip and Moira were speaking directly and extremely effectively to their target audience. If there were any butterflies in those two stomachs for doing their first ever pledge break, and their first ever live television, they were flapping very softly. Moira did, however, at the end of the first break, remark to the production team, “My God. I just realized that really was live television.” She then swallowed and blinked. Blinked hard.

Through the rest of the evening’s pledge taping the pair’s performance just became stronger and stronger. It was apparent to everyone in the studio that evening, and obviously to all those in the audience who phoned in their pledges, that they were speaking from the heart, listening carefully and coming forth with interesting insight and information at every turn.

When you watch *The Funny Ladies of British Comedy*, enjoy the core program with its great clips and interview segments. But pay special attention during the breaks to two consummate artists who in giving of such large measure of themselves, helped create a very special event for all Britcom fans.

