



CHANNEL 4: 40 YEARS OF REVOLUTION

Comedy

Panellists: Channel 4 Head of Comedy Commissioning Charlie Perkins; Trix Worrell (writer, *Desmond's*); Original Senior Commissioning Editor Comedy and Entertainment, Mike Bolland; Peter Richardson (writer, director, actor *The Comic Strip*); Bridget Christie (comedian, writer, actor).

Involving creatives and cast from some of Channel 4's most loved comedies, together with the present Channel 4 Comedy Commissioning team, we celebrate the huge success of such memorable shows aired during the channel's first 10 years, including *The Comic Strip Presents...*, *Drop the Dead Donkey*, *Saturday Live* and *Desmonds*. This skill in discovering new writing, directing and on-screen talent has continued with Channel 4's current comedy slate, including the immense popularity of shows like *Derry Girls*, *Stath Lets Flats* and *We Are Lady Parts*.

Channel 4 Comedy

Though covering a wide range of programming (from one-offs to series, sketch shows to sitcoms, new talent to big names, experimentation to ratings winners and marketable brands), Channel 4's comedy output has altered the broadcasting landscape, while at its inventive, provocative or controversial best, comedy has in turn helped to define the channel's identity.

Associations with 'alternative' comedy began with the opening night's screening of 'Five Go Mad in Dorset' (1982). This was the first production from *The Comic Strip Presents...* (C4/BBC2, 1982-2005), a strand of self-contained films from 'alternative' figures including Adrian Edmondson, Rik Mayall, Peter Richardson, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders. The BBC debuted Strip regulars on *Boom Boom... Out Go the Lights* (BBC, 1980-81) and initiated *The Young Ones* (BBC, 1982-84), but were hastened by the Strip. Widely variant in genre and style, *The Comic Strip Presents'* classics included 'The Strike' (1988), the satirical tale of Hollywood appropriating British history, and 'Mr Jolly Lives Next Door' (1988), a relentlessly violent, grubby distillation of the Mayall/Edmondson double-act.

Another high-profile 'alternative' platform was *Saturday Live/Friday Night Live* (1985-88). Stand-up, character monologues and sketches combined to break stars including Jo Brand, Julian Clary, Ben Elton, Harry Enfield, Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie. New talent emerged in *The Last Resort with Jonathan Ross* (1987-90) and *Saturday Zoo* (1993), not least host Ross, while less-remembered platforms included Anglo-American sketch show *Assaulted Nuts* (1985), stand-up vehicle *The Entertainers* (1983), and *Packet of Three/Packing Them In* (1991-92) featuring Frank Skinner. *Who Dares Wins* (1983-88) was a vital late-night sketch show from a team including Rory McGrath, Jimmy Mulville and Tony Robinson. Combining topicality with provocative breaches of taste, the series was censured by the channel after an advert parody of Christ on the cross accepting a certain brand of cigar. Controversy has followed many major Channel 4 comedies.

However, the channel has never just been an 'alternative' platform. Older comics appeared alongside newer ones, from Frankie Howerd on *Saturday Live* to Spike Milligan on *The Last Laugh Before TV-am* (1985). Mainstream

sitcoms included *Relative Strangers* (1984-85), *Father's Day* (1983-84) and the escalating chaos of *Chance in a Million* (1984-86). 'Traditional' sitcom still broke ground: the women's refuge experiences woven into *The Refuge* (1987-88), or the mainstream multiculturalism of *No Problem!* (1983-85), *Tandoori Nights* (1985-87) and the vibrant *Desmond's* (1988-94).

Overseas comedy played a vital role. American comedians including Emo Phillips, Rita Rudner and Steven Wright illuminated *Saturday Live*; Channel 4 filmed Bill Hicks and commissioned homegrown series such as *The Unpleasant World of Penn and Teller* (1994). Bought-in comedies in the channel's early days included the controversial broadcast of the 1979 *Richard Pryor Live in Concert* (1983) and, less fashionably but successfully, Australian archival imports such as *The Paul Hogan Show* (1973-82) and *The Norman Gunston Show* (1975-79) whose inept (in-character) interviews with major figures pre-empt Ali G and Borat. Hugely successful imported sitcoms included *Cheers* (US, 1982-93), *Frasier* (US, 1993-2004), *The Golden Girls* (US, 1985-92), *The Cosby Show* (US, 1984-92) and *Roseanne* (US, 1988-97). More conventional offerings such as *Friends* (US, 1994-2004) and *Will and Grace* (US, 1998-2006) were balanced by the less mainstream *Dream On* (US, 1990-96) and *South Park* (US, 1997-), and the cost of acquiring *The Simpsons* (US, 1989-) demonstrated the importance of big imports.

Homegrown and overseas talent united in *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (1988-98), which reflected the growth of improvisational comedy and spawned an American version. A channel-defining hit brand, elements of its format were re-used by creators Dan Patterson and Mark Leveson in *Mock the Week* (BBC, 2005-). The makers of *Whose Line...*, *Hat Trick* (set up by *Who Dares Wins* cast members Jimmy Mulville and Rory McGrath with Denise O'Donoghue) showed the impact of Channel 4's 'publisher' remit, becoming a major independent production company. Their output included Roman Britain-set sitcom *Chelmsford 123* (1988-90), inventive sketch show *Paul Merton – The Series* (1991-93), journalism parody *This Is David Lander/This Is David Harper* (1988-90) and the hit newsroom sitcom *Drop the Dead Donkey* (1990-98). Idiosyncratic classics from the turn of the 1990s included *Absolutely* (1989-93), *Vic Reeves' Big Night Out* (1990-91) and Paul Makin's undervalued *Nightingales* (1990-93).

Channel 4's restatement of its remit in 2007 included renewed investment in comedy. This reflects the degree to which its comedy output helps the channel to deliver the combination of experimentation, subversion and commercial success that are signposted by its difficult remit and critical reputation.

Dave Rolinson, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Five Go Mad in Dorset

Transmitted on the channel's opening night, here was an immediate calling card that shouted comedy will be different on Channel 4. Eschewing any legacy from the standard TV situation comedy, it brought a new sense of irony in a lovingly crafted film that aligned Channel 4 firmly with the emerging Alternative Comedy scene, in a splendid send up of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* stories.

THE COMIC STRIP PRESENTS...**FIVE GO MAD IN DORSET**

Director: Bob Spiers

Production Company: Filmworks

For: Channel Four

Producers: Michael Hall, Victoria Poushkine-Relf,

Peter Richardson, Michael White

Written by: Peter Richardson, Pete Richens

Photographed by: Peter Middleton

Editor: Peter Delfgou

Art Director: Adrian Smith

Make-up: Sheila Davy

Cast

Adrian Edmondson (*Dick*)

Dawn French (*George*)

Peter Richardson (*Julian*)

Sandra Dorne (*Aunt Fanny*)

Jennifer Saunders (*Anne*)

Raymond Francis (*police inspector*)

Robbie Coltrane (*gypsy/shopkeeper*)

Ronald Allen (*Uncle Quentin*)

Daniel Peacock (*Toby Thurlow*)

Nosher Powell (*Fingers*)

Ron Tarr (*Dirty Dick*)

C4 tx 2.11.1982

30 mins

CHANNEL 4: 40 YEARS OF REVOLUTION**Music & Youth: The Tube + Discussion & Q&A**

Fri 2 Sep 18:20

Comedy: Discussion & Q&A**+ The Comic Strip Presents: Five Go Mad in Dorset**

Tue 6 Sep 18:15

Channel 4's TV Drama Revolution: Discussion + Q&A

Sun 11 Sep 14:15

A Very British Coup + intro by author Chris Mullin

Sun 11 Sep 16:30

Diversity: Handsworth Songs + Q&A with**John Akomfrah + Panel Discussion & Q&A**

Mon 12 Sep 18:15

Out and Proud: Veronica 4 Rose**+ Out on Tuesday + intro by original****Channel 4 Commissioner Caroline Spry**

Thu 15 Sep 18:15

Access / Direct Speech: The Work They Say Is Mine**+ Women of the Rhondda + Face of Our Fear**

Tue 20 Sep 18:15

Channel 4: The Television Revolution

Fri 23 Sep 18:20

Controversy: Jesus the Evidence + V + Mother Ireland

Sat 24 Sep 18:00

Who Needs Channel 4?

Wed 28 Sep 18:20

Channel 4 Then and Now conference

Fri 23 Sep 10:00–17:00 and Sat 24 Sep 10:00–17:00

Regional screenings and events will be taking place at these venues across the UK (please go to bfi.org.uk/whatson for links): Arncliffe, Bristol; Filmhouse Edinburgh; Queen's Film Theatre, Belfast; Y Drwm, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

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