



## NORTHERN VOICES

# Play for Today: Comedians

### Play for Today: Comedians

Director: Richard Eyre

Production Company: BBC

Producer: Richard Eyre \*

Production Unit Manager: Geoffrey Page

Assistant Floor Manager: Jacmel Dent

Technical Manager: John Bird

Production Assistant: Bill Craske

Director's Assistant: Janet Ogilvie

Screenplay and Original Play: Trevor Griffiths

Senior Camera: Geoffrey Feld

Lighting: Dave Sydenham

Designer: Paul Joel

Costume Designer: Dorothea Wallace

Make-up Artist: Norma Hill

Sound: Norman Bennett

Cast:

Bill Fraser (*Eddie Waters*)

Jonathan Pryce (*Gethin Price*)

David Burke (*Mick Connor*)

Linal Haft (*Sammy Samuels*)

Derrick O'Connor (*George McBrain*)

Edward Peel (*Ged Murray*)

James Warrior (*Phil Murray*)

Ralph Nossek (*Bert Challenor*)

John Barrett (*caretaker*)

Moti Makan (*Mr Patel*)

Mike Henson (*concert secretary*)

BBC1 tx 25.10.1979

94 mins

\* Uncredited

*'Comedy is medicine. Not sugared sweeties to rot yer teeth.'*

In the early Seventies, a regular Saturday night ratings winner was Granada's cheap and cheerful half-hour show *The Comedians*. Sporting lapels which cried out for widescreen TV to have been invented 25 years early, favourites of the Northern club circuit like Bernard Manning and Charlie Williams got the chance to widen their appeal, if only toning down the language, and not the mentality of their acts.

Playwright Trevor Griffiths described watching the show as being like sitting in front of a firing squad. 'It was a free for all: Paki jokes, gay jokes, the lot.' Then one fateful lunchtime, a gaggle of stars of the show came into The Red Lion near Granada studios where Griffiths was having a drink, all thirsty after a morning rehearsing their routines. What sparked Griffiths' imagination was their discussion about a legendary comic who had now retired and was giving an evening class to aspiring comics in a room above the pub. Bizarre though the concept was, they had a strange respect for the old man, and Griffiths had the starting point for the greatest play of his career to date. He never went to watch the old guru in action. He already knew in his head who he wanted his comic coach to be: a warhorse of the music hall age trying to teach the morality of comedy to a class of ruthless young hopefuls desperate for an escape from the building site or the milk round at any cost. He christened him Eddie Waters.

The play is set in a Manchester comprehensive on a wet Friday night, as the men attend their final evening class with Eddie and meet an agent's scout from London. In Act Two they're off to a working man's club where the agent can watch them in action before a crowd. In Act Three, it's back to the classroom for the verdict on who will be heading for the bright lights, and who won't be giving up the day job.

Director Richard Eyre described *Comedians'* opening night at Nottingham Playhouse in 1975 as 'terrifying and thrilling' and when the play hit London it kicked off with what he called 'the most exciting night I have ever spent in the theatre.' As Waters' unpredictable protégé Gethin Price, Jonathan Pryce gave a performance so uncompromising that one woman invaded the stage to attack him. The play left its audiences shattered, scooped up the awards and then transferred to Broadway.

By the time Eyre began his stint as producer of *Play for Today* at the BBC, *Comedians* had already passed into theatrical legend. Eyre came to television drama just in time to make good use of the last of the golden age, and one of his first tasks was to get *Comedians* into the studio with as many of the original cast as he could reassemble, and preserve forever one of the most prescient and shocking moments of modern drama.

*Comedians* is also a perfect illustration of the beauty and unique power the studio play possessed. Actors were allowed to build performances through lengthy rehearsals before the recording, which was vision mixed live, capturing all the immediacy and excitement of a live performance. Even television's insistence on rewrites of the play's angry language does not blunt its effect. Griffiths pleaded for one strong expletive during Pryce's act to stay, which he suggested could be bleeped if the BBC were unhappy about it. They allowed it to pass however, only to then panic at the eleventh hour and reschedule the play for a 10.10pm slot as opposed to *Play for Today's* regular 9.25pm post.

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Thu 30 Mar 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 20:40

### The Wednesday Play: No Trams to Lime Street

+ Armchair Theatre: The Hard Knock

Fri 31 Mar 18:20

### Of Time and the City

Sat 1 Apr 20:40; Tue 18 Apr 18:20

### Saturday Night Theatre: Roll On Four O'Clock

+ Play for Today: Kisses at 50

Tue 4 Apr 18:10

### Billy Liar

Thu 6 Apr 20:30; Fri 14 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 20:50

### Letter to Breznev

Fri 7 Apr 18:20; Thu 20 Apr 20:50

### Priest

Sat 8 Apr 20:40

### The Arbor

Tue 11 Apr 20:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:30

### Play for Today: Comedians

Sat 15 Apr 15:15

### Play for Today: The Land of Green Ginger

+ Armchair Theatre: The Pity of it All

Sun 16 Apr 15:20

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This was guaranteed to lose it a good third of its potential audience, a loss which Griffiths mourned in a furious letter to *The Times* after transmission.

In 1975 Griffiths was already one of the most exciting and outspoken playwrights in the country. As well as his theatrical triumphs, for *Play for Today* he had scored a richly deserved success with *All Good Men*, a beautifully written and intimate tale of a retiring socialist faced with the angry accusations of his radical son. An even greater success was *Through the Night*, which drew 11 million viewers into the story of a woman who goes into hospital for a routine check and undergoes a mastectomy without any consultation. Featuring endearing performances from Alison Steadman and Jack Shepherd, it remains a classic piece of event television.

In *Comedians* as in *All Good Men*, Griffiths plays off the old left against the rising new left (not to be confused with New Labour, whatever that is) as Eddie Waters, while trying to defeat the metaphorical right represented in the form of the bigoted comics, eagerly offering their stock of Christmas cracker misogyny and racism, is rendered impotent when faced with the ferocious shaven-headed radical in the form of Gethin Price. Gethin is a chilling product of the times which Waters initially fails to fully recognise. But as well as the beautiful metaphor of comic morality as a political decision, Griffiths has also been praised for inventing the alternative comedy movement which began to overtake the Davidsons and the Mannings in the Eighties. By the Nineties, with Stan Boardman famously committing professional suicide on live television by telling a joke 30 years out of date and no terrestrial channel prepared to engage Bernard Manning, it seemed that comedy was developing the morality Eddie Waters appeals to his class for. But Griffiths wasn't complacent, seeing Jim Davidson's return to primetime and Manning's gradual rediscovery as an ironic icon as worrying trends. 'Manning is not a great comedian, but he *is* a great technician.' Griffiths knew his enemy enough to not underestimate him.

Have we found a perfect third route for laughter and satire today? Recent comedies such as *The Office* have managed to make characters' failed attempts to disguise their bigotry funny at their expense, something one could argue that *Til Death Us Do Part* never succeeded in doing, as its laughter was usually triggered not by the ludicrousness of Alf's rants but by the use of a term of racist abuse or misogyny as a punchline. Meanwhile, Chris Morris' search for the truth about and behind the headlines has made very little taboo for an intelligent satirist.

'I wanna be rich and famous,' states one of the class. 'More than you want be good?' asks Waters. 'What's wrong with being all three?' comes the reply. 'Nothing,' says Waters, 'as long as you want to be good first because you'll never be good later.' There lies the dilemma facing today's television commissioning editors. As we watch the beautifully played closing moments, we are watching the Seventies fade away and with them the concept of the *Play for Today*. Just listen to Gethin's words and think of them as a prediction that truthful, angry drama about the problems we live around is being replaced by irrelevant entertainment. Eyre looks back now with nostalgia on his years as a television producer, remembering that '*Play for Today* was a national event. That kind of television has gone forever. Whether it has been consciously destroyed I don't know. But we did have a leader in the Eighties who said she didn't believe in society. And one of the ways you would go about destroying the notion of society is by removing the shared sensation of watching a piece of contemporary drama critical of the society we live in.'

Simon Farquhar