
[N.B. This is our 2nd interview with Roger Allam. HS was working on an article that examined in particular the series ‘The Curse of Comedy’ of which *The Curse of Steptoe* was a part. This interview focused exclusively on this docudrama, and on HS’s interest in the BBC Light Entertainment Dept. during the 1960s. Phil Davis (Wilfred Brambell) was also interviewed by the project.

The Curse of Steptoe

first broadcast 19 March 2008, BBC4 in the series ‘Legends of Comedy’.

Selected Cast:

Harry H Corbett	Jason Isaacs
Wilfrid Brambell	Phil Davis
Tom Sloan	Roger Allam
Sheila Steafel	Zoe Tapper
Ray Galton	Burn Gorman
Alan Simpson	Rory Kinnear
Joan Littlewood	Clare Higgins
Director:	Michael Samuels

The on-and-off-screen relationship between Corbett and Brambell during the making of the 1960s BBC sitcom *Steptoe and Son*. Research for the script included interviews with those who knew the two men and the *Steptoe* writers Alan Simpson and Ray Galton.

Writer Brian Fillis, also wrote the 2006 BBC4 docudrama *Fear of Fanny*, about TV cook Fanny Cradock.

The Curse of Steptoe was a critical success, winning the 2008 RTS Single Drama award. Harry H. Corbett’s family, however, made a complaint to the BBC, leading to re-editing for subsequent broadcasts. The BBC Trust investigated further in November 2010, and in December published a report that found the drama unfair and inaccurate. This led to the BBC withdrawing the DVD from sale. The broadcaster also undertook to re-edit in the event of any re-broadcasting.

The December 2010 ‘Summary of finding’ stated:

The complaint was made by the brother of Maureen Corbett, the deceased second wife of Harry H. Corbett. In May 2009 the Editorial Standards Committee found that the programme had been inaccurate and unfair by implying that the child of Maureen and Harry had been conceived as a result of a casual relationship. The complainant said that although the drama had been edited following the Committee’s decision it had not been sufficiently edited to take account of the Committee’s findings on fairness and accuracy prior to its repeat on BBC HD and its release on BBC DVD.

The Committee concluded:

- **that whilst it appreciated the effort the BBC had made in re-editing the content the overall nature of the relationship portrayed in the drama remained ambiguous leading to the impression of a casual relationship between Maureen and Harry**
- **that as the revised portrayal of the relationship stood it was still unfair and inaccurate to Maureen Corbett**
- **that despite the edits made, further action was required by the BBC to remove the impression of a casual relationship between Maureen and Harry.**

The complaint was upheld

See the full report at:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc_bulletins/2010/nov.pdf
This Summary was accessed 10 February 2012.]

HS: First of all, please could you take me through the process of the production of *The Curse of Steptoe* for you.

RA: Well, God, it's difficult to remember now, y'know, because the thing is unlike preparing a theatre piece where you're rehearsing for quite a long time...I mean, all we did on this was a read-through. I think someone gave me some notes on the character...and we just started. So, I mean, I did absolutely no in-depth research for this whatsoever other than get a kind of clue of...Actually, I had I think a Galton and Simpson book in which they talked about Tom Sloan. And so from that book and also from the director...Think back to that period and a lot of people in the BBC had come out of the military and, y'know, I looked at pictures of him and stuff like that...And that was kind of it...And I think what was interesting, what was interesting for me, was that...you think of the military, and you think, 'Oh, well, they had very closed minds.' But actually quite a lot of people who'd been through the Second World War and been in the military that way, you know, had a sort of really can-do sort of attitude in the aftermath of the war. [They'd] been through such terrible things...y'know. And I know it was very much to the surprise of Galton and Simpson – when they left writing for Hancock, Tom Sloan was the producer that they suggested writing these one-off 'Comedy Playhouses', and he said, 'Yes, OK! Yeah, alright.'

HS: So were you clear about Tom Sloan's position in the BBC?

RA: I was then. I can't remember what it is now, it's all gone, I'm afraid. Y'know, ages ago, you don't kinda remember telly in nearly the same way.

HS: Why is that?

RA: I think it's 'cause it doesn't occupy as much of your life. I mean, this occupied two weeks of my life, really, maybe three. Whereas this play that I'm doing now will occupy 8 months of my life.

[N.B. RA was playing Max Reinhardt in Michael Frayne's *Afterlife* at the National – see the earlier *Acting with Facts* interview with him.]

And indeed will have occupied longer, 'cause I was offered this play before I was offered 'Steptoe and Son', so it will have been around in my head much, much longer.

HS: Given that *The Curse of Steptoe* is centred on Wilfred Bramble and Harry H. Corbett, how important...is the factual detail for the supporting characters around those two?

RA: Well, I think, it's very important because it was Tom Sloan who was not only the driving force in sort of saying to Galton and Simpson, 'Fine, do the one-off "Comedy Playhouses"' but also it was he who was behind, because of the incredible audience figures, it was he who was always behind keeping it going as long as possible, y'know...And offering more money. So that I mean, he was very much the driving force behind that when Galton and Simpson kind of...The reason they wanted to...I mean. the reason they wanted to do the one-off 'Comedy Playhouses' was 'cause they didn't want to get stuck doing a long-running sitcom again, and that's precisely what happened. And of course for actors like Harry H. Corbett they had no idea then, really, what it was like to get an audience of 19, 20 million, y'know. Astounding. But of course from Tom Sloan's point of view, as part of BBC management, that's absolutely fantastic, y'know. You just wanna keep that as much as possible, and then find all the variations. 'Oh. we'll do it all again in colour! Fabulous!' Y'know, 'Brilliant!'

HS: So how aware were you of the BBC Light Entertainment environment? Did you need to be?

RA: No, I wasn't that aware, y'know. I had enough, given the size of the role and the story of the piece, I had enough to go on.

HS: The audience will not have a clue who Tom Sloan was...

RA: No.

HS: ...so how...Just to pick up on something you said last night about playing iconic figures, Sloan isn't iconic to the public but he is to a certain extent to the people he worked with, or in BBC Light Entertainment. So how do you balance the two?

[N.B. When HS says 'last night' she refers to the 'Platform' event at the National – RA was part of the 'Acting with Facts' panel.]

RA: Well, in the sense of him not being iconic to the audience, I mean, you don't...It sort of releases you from any heavy burden, really, because the fact that he was a figure of great power to everyone else involved in the story is there in the story. It's there in the script, y'know, it's there for all to see. And the fact that the audience doesn't really know who he is, is a kind of release. Because then what you really have to do is sort of give a flavour of the period. Which is done in just hair and kind of look, the fact that he was dressed...The fact that his look changed very, very little [laughs] over the period, y'know. I mean, I'm old enough to remember people like that as well, y'know, **[RA adopts RP accent]** 'Hello, how are you?' Y'know [laughs]! [They] always looked sort of the same. Shirt, tie, jacket, blazer, that sort of thing. Suit. So, in a sense, you're giving the audience, I 'spose, a feeling of the BBC then. That the BBC was peopled by the...There were characters like that in the BBC, and in positions of power rather than the kind of current sort of, y'know, Management Science automatons...That people the BBC, I suppose...really a flavour, a flavour of the kind of person who was in the BBC at that moment, and a flavour of the period.

HS: Would you say that it also gives a flavour of how programmes were made then too? Or is that not important?

RA: It probably is important, but within the context of the script there wasn't really room to do it. I don't personally know whether lots and lots and lots of, you probably know far more about that than me, whether lots of programmes were made like that or not. Were they?

HS: I think probably it's fair to say that Tom Sloan wouldn't have been sitting in on rehearsals as much as could be seen in the programme.

RA: Mmm.

HS: And what intrigued me as well was that he wasn't actually a producer. There were other producers of the programme who weren't mentioned.

RA: So what was he, then? I forget now.

HS: He was Head of Light Entertainment, Television.

RA: Head of Light Entertainment. [pause] Budget and time, there probably isn't time to introduce another character of substance...

HS: ...and if it's not the focus of the piece...?

RA: Yes, absolutely. I mean, when you think of the impact that Joan Littlewood had on Harry H. Corbett's life, she's hardly there at all.

HS: This is a form of biopic on ‘popular culture’ figures, so have you any thoughts on how this compares to those on, for example, political or major public figures of a different kind? Is there a different kind of approach you need to take?

RA: Mmm, well, I ‘spose you’re gonna get a different audience, probably a slightly different audience to, y’know, say something like *Never So Good*...

[N.B. Howard Brenton’s *Never So Good*, a play about Harold Macmillan, was then running at the National.]

Then maybe, I’m sure there’ll be a crossover. I’m sure lots of fans of *Steptoe and Son* – I think they were re-running *Steptoe and Son* as well, weren’t they? – will see that programme. Maybe they didn’t like it, I don’t know, maybe they didn’t know any of that history. I mean, within the business a lot of that history is known. I mean, I knew that Harry H. Corbett was considered by some people to be a great, a great classical actor. I knew about his history in Theatre Workshop and Joan Littlewood...I didn’t know the *particularity* of it, y’know, but I did know it. So I guess there’d be quite a lot of people who must have loved *Steptoe and Son* but didn’t know that. But...

HS: Is there something about Comedy figures?

RA: There is, I guess, yes...And in one sense it’s a crude sort of thing, y’know, ‘Oh, look! These people make us laugh!’ ‘Yes, but they were terribly sad, and they hated each other!’ And, y’know, there’s something rather gruesome about that, I think. The sort of, ‘Oh, isn’t that great! [laughs] They were rich and famous but really unhappy. *Fantastic!*’ [laughs] Which seems to be what...Y’know, it seems to be quite a current thing, doesn’t it? I mean, especially...I mean, I was interested last night **[N.B. again a reference to the ‘Platform’ event]** in the links with reality...Y’know, there didn’t seem to be the time and space to bring it up, but I mean I wonder whether part of the current fascination with going over biographies of the past and present, whether reality television is part of the same impetus as well. Which is to sort of, to some extent hold people...I mean, because a lot of reality television is like, about making people famous and holding, holding them up to utter ridicule and scorn. It’s a very, very curious phenomenon it seems to me. [pause] Although, again, there’s another strand of it, more recent strand of it that...is about saying, ‘Look here, these people, they can really sing, or really dance. How fantastic!’ But sort of, the other strand of it, *Big Brother*, is, ‘Here are these really, really ordinary people, aren’t they shit?’ y’know...And they’re...and we’re better than them, I suppose, or, ‘Ha ha!’ I mean it’s, weird, isn’t it?

HS: But if I can come back to the Steptoe programme, there’s a sense of ‘Golden Age’ about it?

RA: Mmmm. (nods)

HS: That the programme appears to want to delve beyond, to find the ‘real story’? Did you get any specific pointers from the director, can you recall?

RA: [pause] I can't, I can't, really, I'm afraid. I'm sure there were and I'm sure there were when we did the initial read-through about the kind of guy he was 'cause he obviously knew more about it than me. [pause] I remember when we were doing the post-synching we added in a bit in the phone conversation. We added some lines in and I came up with a line, or something like that, but I can't quite remember, it really. It's really sort of gone.

HS: Did you have any conversations with the other actors?

RA: In discussing the piece? No, we just sat around and gossiped! [laughs] Maybe we did, y'know, I'm sorry this isn't... You probably need to talk to one of the others who had more to do.

HS: 'Cause I was interested, although it's a small part of the programme, how the production of BBC comedy is presented and whether or not you had any specific research on that or knowledge of that when you were doing it?

RA: No. It's a question of time. Time and money, really, time and money and the budget. Their budget and my budget, y'know... And whether I've got the time and they're paying me enough money [laughs], and the part is big enough to sort of warrant that kind of investigation. Or whether you just sort of think, 'Well, there we are! This is what it is!' I thought the programme was rather short, actually. I thought an hour was rather short to explore the rise and fall of *Steptoe and Son*, y'know. Given that it was an hour long and the nature of the role... I mean, here's where, y'know, one or two things like a moustache and a haircut can kind of set you off on a path, y'know. Once I'd got a moustache, and once my hair had been cut a certain way, and I'd, I think maybe I was greyed up a bit, I can't even remember now. Once I'd looked in the mirror, and I had the suit and the tie and the jacket. Sort of, there he was, really, y'know. As long as you've got enough to go on to, to say the lines, and the lines don't then seem ridiculous, y'know. And in a sense the character had, in the piece, had simple objectives, y'know. 'Yes, write what you like – this one's gonna be a big series! Yes, let's keep the big series on as long as possible!' Doesn't matter about anything else, y'know, in a sense that's a very, very simple trajectory. [pause] But, in a sense it's the writers and the directors, if they decide, 'Oh, I think we've got something bigger here, to explore something about Light Entertainment in the BBC, that's their job in a way... To decide, 'Oh, here's an interesting programme. Let's make that!' Or, 'Let's make that programme longer and explore some of that within it.'

HS: So how was the two, three weeks divided up for you?

RA: [pause] I think I went along... for a read-through and a bit of a discussion about it in, sort of the week before we started filming. And... saw some photos of him, had a fitting, y'know, had costume fittings. And then, actually, I think all my stuff was done the following week. And they had another week's filming after me when I wasn't involved and that's how it happened. And... just trying to remember where my stuff was, 'cause

that all makes a difference as well in filming. Miles away from where I live [laughs] in North London, y'know, where I, really near where I used to live. Now I live in South West London, so it means I have to get up unbelievably early [laughs] to get to this miserable car park in Finsbury Park. Y'know, those sort of things make a huge difference!

[Pause]

HS: So would it be physical appearance that would have started this off for you?

RA: Yes, that's, yes, I think there's a sort of...Y'know, John Gielgud once said that style was knowing what play you're in, in the sense you've got to know what job you're in...And sometimes it...it's almost like a sketch that you can see. David Edgar was talking last night about...You can sort of just find a couple of things and think, 'Oh, yes, there we are! That character's come, sort of emerged, out of the big sea [laughs] of other possible characters that one has within one!'

HS: I think that's all I have to ask, really, but is there anything else you'd like to say about that specific production?

RA: It's...it is interesting, isn't it, that they gave it that thing, 'The Curse of Comedy'? I mean, it is, of course a cliché...The sad clown, y'know, the tragedy behind the mask...

HS: Were you made at all aware of the relationship between the producers and the stars?

RA: At that time? No. [pause] Did you like the series?

HS: I did like the series, I found it very interesting.

RA: You see, I remember all these, when I was a child I remember all, I remember the Galton and Simpson Comedy Playhouse stuff, remember it being on. I remember Hancock, Frankie Howerd.

HS: It is interesting how the focus has ended up on the stars without really making the point that programmes as a whole were absolutely groundbreaking.

RA: Yes. Of course, at that time that's where, that's sort of where Variety went, isn't it? I mean, y'know, when you think of the turn of the 19th and 20th century, Dan Leno was making a fortune, y'know. Huge, hugely popular performer. And then gradually, gradually that kind of died for all kinds of reasons. Although people were still doing Variety, we still had *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, stuff like that. Bruce Forsyth, Frankie Howerd, did Variety. But a lot of them...Frankie Howerd, you see, had come out of this sort of Death of Variety, hadn't he, really? Whereas I suppose the point is made in the programme that Harry H. Corbett and Wilfred Bramble were actors. So you're getting the sort of, the mingling of actors and variety people.

HS: It's the point where the BBC starts to take comedy seriously. That's why I thought it was interesting how they included elements of the BBC through your character and relationship with the writers.

RA: Yes [nods].

HS: Obviously the focus is on the two stars themselves...

RA: Yes, but I guess, I mean that is, like we've been saying, it is that obsession with biography, isn't it? Celebrity and all that. I mean, the programme wouldn't have been made if they'd, if they'd called it 'Tom Sloan' [laughs].

HS: Do you think such programmes help to maintain the idea of a 'Golden Age'?

RA: There are lots of 'Golden Ages', though. I mean, y'know, the past is always a 'Golden Age', really. I mean, I think there's a certain truth though, there was...It was a very interesting period in the post-war period, y'know. Start of an economic boom, the mixture of Variety people and actors, y'know. Lots of...lots of breaking down of things and reformings, and, y'know. So, in a sense, it was...a fertile period, more fertile than it seems to me now. But that might be just because I'm older now. And if I was, y'know, in my early twenties...The BBC now seems to me a terribly, terribly difficult organisation to deal with and break into. Lots of friends of mine who are writers are sort of...in despair, y'know. There are far more echelons of management and financial control in the BBC than there used to be then. But that's the same in more or less every organisation, every kind of organisation since that time. There's far more management and account... more managers and accountants and less, in a way, less stuff being actually made. So in that sense, I suppose, it was a golden era because the dead hand of management and accountancy hadn't been laid quite so...Wasn't lying quite so heavily on us, y'know.

HS: And do you think you can see that through programmes such as *The Curse of Steptoe*?

RA: I don't know, I hadn't thought about it, I was just saying that off the top of my head, really. And with a little bit of inside knowledge...trying to think of what I watch, what comedies I watch now...I don't think they quite know what to do. I think...I know for a fact that they're after...What they're after in the BBC is another big BBC 1 comedy, y'know...Something...that can replace *The Vicar of Dibley*. There are loads of potential BBC 2 and BBC 3 and 4 comedies, sort of rude, kind of in-your-face stuff. But stuff like *My Family*, they're desperate for another one of those. They don't know where to get it, so a kind of certainty has fallen away, I think.