

## **Andy Hamilton**

### **Comedian and screenwriter**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the comedian, screenwriter and author Andy Hamilton. Familiar to the public with his appearances on shows such as QI, Have I Got News for You and Radio 4's The News Quiz, he is better known in the industry as an accomplished writer and producer. Working with partner Guy Jenkin, he has co-created major TV shows such as Outnumbered, Drop the Dead Donkey and Who Dares Wins.**

**Born in Fulham in 1954, Andy read English at Cambridge, and in the 1970s started his career as a comedy scriptwriter, writing for shows such as Not the Nine O'Clock News. A prolific writer and performer on dozens of shows over many decades, his first novel, The Star Witness, has just been successfully crowdfunded and will be published on September 8, 2016.**

**Andy, thanks for joining me.**

Thank you! Thank you for having me.

**Tell me, let's begin at the start, did you always want to be in comedy then? Did you always want to be a writer or performer, what was it? Were you always funny? Where did it come from?**

I don't know! I didn't... I can't honestly put my hand on my heart and say that I'd earmarked writing as a career, or even comedy performing. I remember being in a school play, which was a play about some kids being snowed in at a school, and they cast me as the kind of fat funny one. And I could remember...

**How old were you at this point?**

I was about 15, and I can remember getting laughs on my lines and thinking, "Yes, that's a quite a nice feeling." But I didn't really think much more of it and then I went to...

### **Had you written those lines?**

No, it was a play. And then I went to Cambridge and I joined a thing called CULES, which stood for the Cambridge University Light Entertainment Society, and it was a kind of longstanding charity that did shows primarily for children's homes, hospitals, prisons, Borstals, old people's homes... people who could not get away basically. But to fund it, every now and then they would do a show in a commercial theatre. So I... in fact, I joined as a driver, strangely. Well, the truth of it is I joined it because I thought it would be a place to meet girls. I was an all-male college and I thought, "Yeah," so and I had a very battered old Volkswagen Beetle, I was one of the very few students who had a car. I sort of secretly had a car and used to park it in college without permission and stuff. So initially, I just drive lights and costumes to shows and then during a pantomime, a kid broke the nose of Uncle Abenazer and I ended up standing in, and then I joined one of the groups as a performer... and then I stayed. They had a very old stock of sketches so I started writing the odd thing, and gradually that turned into me being in the RAG review, and then and then finally at the end of my three years we took a show for the second time we went up to Edinburgh and I had written these two shows. After one of the shows, a very nice stage manager came back and said, "There's a bloke here who says he's from the BBC." And I said, "Well, why would he lie about that?" She said, "I don't know, but do you want me to let him through?" So I said, "Yes, go on then." And it turned out to be Geoffrey Perkins, who was then very young, and he was just starting at the BBC as a trainee radio producer and he said something along the lines of, "Have you thought of writing for a living?" And I hadn't really, not in any concrete way. So he said, "Well, I'm starting on Week Ending, why don't you come along and just see if you can get anything on?" And so I did, and I did stuff on spec, got a couple of things on, and then I got a two-minute commission at £2 per minute, so I was guaranteed £4 a week on Week Ending. So even though I didn't have...

### **Was that a lot of money, then?**

Well, no actually it wasn't that much money, but you got another £2 a minute, you know, if I got seven minutes on I got £2 for all those additional minutes as well. Then I graduated to a sort of five-minute commission and then... and my rates started to go up. But I'd been doing it about a month I think, when I suddenly realised, that the thought was formed in my head now, that this was what I wanted to do because it was really interesting and enjoyable and fascinating, you know, so...

**What did you want to do, like say 10 minutes before Geoffrey first approached you? What was in your mind's eye, what you were going to do?**

I don't know. Like the majority of people... I mean I'm one of the very lucky few who found out what I want to do really early in my life. Like most people of that age, I was drifting. I didn't know. I would probably have ended up being a rather grumpy teacher at a secondary school somewhere, that is probably what would have happened, but luckily Geoffrey saved me.

**Do you enjoy the process of writing comedy, then? Because when I'd like to compose... it's not in your league by compose light-hearted e-mails or spoof articles and I laugh out loud at my own jokes.**

Yes, that's legit. Yes, that's fine. That's good. That is fine. The first time, as long as you don't laugh every time you read it... I think you do. I think the moment when you think of it, if it really tickles you, you probably do laugh to yourself maybe inwardly rather than outwardly... maybe, I don't know. I laugh outwardly sometimes. But then once you've written it the first time, every time after that you look at it you're kind of looking at it from a kind of structural point of view and you're thinking, "Well, does that need polishing? Would it be funnier if I turned it round?" But the actual moment of discovery, I think you should. I think it's probably good sign if it makes you laugh because it means that you're in the moment.

**But when you're script writing, I mean for example, if you're on QI or Have I Got News for You, and something pops into your head, you can just say it and it gets a laugh.**

Yes.

**But if you're writing a script you've got to think, "How would this actor do it? Would it be funny if he or she said it?"**

Yes.

**Is that a consideration after the fact then?**

Oh, I mean there are millions of considerations after the fact because the first version of that comic thought that you have, it may in essence be right, but it may well be far from being right in terms of its shape or its tone. I mean, it depends. If I'm doing it as me that's very different to if I'm writing a character. When you're writing in character you are trying to hear those characters' voices and how they would talk, you know?

**Anyway, I'm determined to go through your career.**

Okay.

**So let's go back to you finished coasting, Geoffrey's offered you this job... and what are we up to now, is it four minutes you were guaranteed? What's the retainer?**

I started on... yes, I started on two minutes at £2 per minute, and then I think I went to five, and then I then I had a stroke of luck which was that the two established writers on Week Ending – because Week Ending was a weekly topical comedy magazine type format, and two very good writers had been doing it for a while, Alistair Beaton and Colin Bostock-Smith, and for differing various reasons they both decided they then wanted to move on and do something else. So suddenly a lot of potential commission came out and so me and a guy called Barry Pilton, we got the lion's share of that. So suddenly, we had a lot more commission; a lot more responsibility as well, of course.

**Did you feel at that moment, "I've arrived."?**

In a way it was one of the more... I mean, it was hugely enjoyable. But it was also quite stressful. I did have a phase where I... because the big day was Thursday. Thursday was like this mega writing day where you got in early and you wrote sketch after sketch, and they had to have... the thing about Week ending was that they had to have a point, they had to have a journalistic argument in them and be funny, and have a bit of character if possible as well. So they were really, editorially, they were quite demanding to write. As part of the adrenaline rush on those Thursdays I developed this tic whereby I would be going in to work on the tube and I would get off Oxford Circus, but at Green Park, which was the stop before Oxford Circus, I would always get nauseous, so I would get off the train at Green Park, throw up on the platform and then get back on the train and proceed to one more stop.

**Do you look back fondly at this or with horror?!**

No, it was not great, but what was funny looking back was that because I was a creature of habit, you know, I was going in at the same time and this was happening to me on a regular weekly basis for about six weeks, it tended to be the same people on the train, so I did realise after about three weeks that we people would be looking at me thinking, "Oh, no it's that bloke, he's going to do it at Green park." Yes. And then it just magically – touch wood – it's not happened since, but...

**So take us through this Thursday, then. So you've obviously vommed at Green Park and you manage to get into the office.**

Yes.

**How does it work when you're writing a kind of topical news show like that? Do you literally just read through the papers and think, "Oh, we could make something of that," or are you kind of... does the producer say, "We want to do something on this story," and you think of jokes around it?**

From memory, there used to be a meeting on the Wednesday when the stories were kind of parcelled up and the producer would say, "Write this story here," like if there's a vote on whether to bomb Syria or something, you know, "Has anyone got an angle on that or a way of doing it?" And then you would discuss it and then he would kind of allocate it, and in those days it was a he, there were no there were no women producers at the BBC in the '70s when I was there. That didn't mean to say it was kind of out of bounds for the other writers to try and do something, but it was understood that you know, so-and-so had first dibs on that piece, but if his piece didn't work then the producer might come back and say, "Anyone got another angle or a different sketch approach for that?" So it was kind of... it was a bit like working on a newspaper I suppose. Except that you had lots of stories to cover.

**And how do what worked and what didn't? Did you just read the jokes to the your colleagues and they either got a laugh or it didn't? Because I mean, I've seen comics where did they do like testing, you know, previews of their shows, and comics that I would have thought are very funny all the time, you go and half of their set's funny and half of it isn't, and that's the whole point of these previous shows because they ditch the stuff that didn't get a laugh.**

Yes. Well, in fact I've just done that myself, I was on tour recently and I did three 'work in progress' shows as they're called, and they are useful. Well, you didn't have that luxury on Week Ending because the deadlines were too tight, so you either had a show with lots of funny stuff in, thought provoking stuff, or you had a rather dull show with lots of stuff that wasn't funny and wasn't thought provoking or... and all points between, so... and there wasn't a studio audience so it didn't have that immediate feedback, it didn't have that sort of audition if you like.

**How long were you at Week Ending for?**

I don't know, two years? Something like that.

**How did you come to leave, then? What came next?**

Maybe two to three years... well, I did other stuff on radio, I wrote for the other topical show they did, which was The News Huddlines, which was on Radio 2 – Week Ending was on Radio 4. And The News Huddlines was built around Roy Hudd, who hosted it, and that was a more sort of mainstream show, and that was with an audience. So that was, you know, you had the excitement of seeing it performed in front of an audience.

**Did you always see Roy perform it, then? Did you did you go to every recording?**

I think yes, when I was working on it, it was a lunchtime on a Wednesday... I can't remember now. Yes, that was sort of the best bit in a way was sitting in the Paris studio, which is this lovely old historic studio that the BBC sold off...

**Hearing people laugh at your jokes.**

Yes. But also watching Roy, and enjoying watching Roy, the way he worked with an audience, the way he made them feel relaxed and at home. And you had some really good performers supporting him, people like Chris Emmett and Janet Brown and people... and what was really interesting was, there were moments... I wasn't the only writer who did both shows, and occasionally there would be a line that in the sort of slightly more sterile atmosphere of Week Ending, which was an audience show, could come across as too hard, you know, too scathing or too vicious, but occasionally we would give them to Roy, and because Roy had this sort of lovely approachable kind of... because Roy felt like fun, you could give him some really quite evil jokes about politicians or about stories.

**And he would get away with it.**

Yes! And no one... there would be no complaints, I mean all during the Jeremy Thorpe trial we were really struggling to get anything on Radio 4, get anything past the lawyers or whatever. But Roy, we could give in this stuff he's make it sound... he'd say it, he'd get a laugh from the audience, and it was only after he'd said it you'd think, "Did he just say what I thought he said?" You know. But he was a brilliant comedian and a great kind of team leader, a great leading man in a company, and.. so I was very... they were both happy times but I think Huddlines was a particularly happy time. John Lloyd was producing it, and John's a brilliant producer, and very demanding which was good. John... you know, you're downing a first draft which you thought was a work of genius, and John would make you do another pass and do another pass and you know, that was great – that was exactly what, at that stage of your career, you needed, you know.

**Did you think of yourself at this point as a comedy writer, or were you looking at Roy and thinking, "I want to learn from this guy because I want to be on the stage."?**

Well, I was kind of keeping my arm in on the performing, but only in a very kind of lightweight sort of way. You know, there was a group of mates, we used to do the odd thing, I would get up at the BBC Smokers and do stuff, you know... so I was still

keeping my sort of performance chops there, but I was fundamentally focusing on establishing myself as a comedy write, yes.

**It's almost a cliché to say that most people in comedy behind the scenes are quite miserable, depressive types. Is there any truth to that?**

I don't think so, no. Well, you know, they'll look at Tony Hancock, very tragically committed suicide, or they'll look at Peter Sellers, who was clearly a highly complex personality, and they would say, "Well, that's the that's the sadness behind the face of the clown," and all that. But I mean, the reality is there are plumbers who suffer from depression and commit suicide. It's part of the human condition that a percentage of the population are unfortunate enough to suffer these problems. It's only because of the contrast with a job where you're supposed to go and make people laugh that I think people are fascinated by this idea that behind the comedian there is a hunched, twisted figure. I mean, I would say I've encountered... I mean, most of the people I've worked with have been positive people who've enjoyed their work. Yes, they've got egos but plumbers have egos as well, you know, it's just... I mean you need an ego... you need a healthy ego to want to be a performer, you know, so I would say it's a myth, personally. If you looked at the stats, if a statistician approached it and looked at 100 comedy writers, I'm sure you would discover a couple who have had severe psychological problems, but I think in general I think we hit the national average.

**I used to work in politics for many years and I remember when I used to going to the like the green room at Sky and you'd see politicians there were bitter enemies on screen, they'd be very warm and friendly with one another and exchange quite personal anecdotes and information, and then they'd go on air, tear strips off one another, and then when they'd come off they'd be slapping each other on the back and chatting. It was almost as if they had the work persona and then they had their real persona.**

Yes.

**What's it like behind the scenes at say, QI, when you're in the green room? Is it all like lots of quips and joviality, or are you all just checking your emails on your iPad?**

Haha. Well, not me!

**Because you don't even have a mobile phone, obviously.**

Well, I'm not checking my emails on my iPad! It's the kind of jovial, pre-worky atmosphere, you know. I mean, it depends on of course, but fundamentally it's people sitting around, someone will usually be telling an anecdote, and then that will

probably remind someone else of another anecdote, a bit like an evening down the pub except that of course that shortly you're going to go out in front of an audience. There might be ever such a slight element of warm-up going on, people just kind of sharpening their brains up, but it's not a bum fight, you know, it's not a comedy bear pit where people are all... at least in my experience it's not.

**One of the other things that interested me about filming comedy on the television is I was an audience member of have I Got news for You a couple of years ago, and I have watched it for decades, and I love the show, never miss it. And I thought, "Well, it's half an hour on telly and I know it's going to be two and a bit hours to record it, so it will be two and a half hours of amazing merriment from start to finish." And what I realise is actually it's quite a slog isn't it, really? The show is the best bits of the two and half hours condensed, and the bits they cut out aren't funny!**

Oh, it's you going, "Umm... er..." and that's why... sometimes people stop you on a train or something and say, "Oh, I love that show you're all so quick," and I think, "Well, you'd be quick if we edited out every unfunny thing you said and every hesitation, and every moment where you scratch your head and said: 'Well, I don't know.'" I mean, that's if it goes really well, of course, that gives the producers a huge problem.

**What do you cut out?**

Yes. And then it's really difficult for them but yes, it's about an hour and a half, bit more maybe, so they keep about a third, between a third and a quarter I'd say.

**Is it less burdensome for you as a performer to have Paul Merton there and someone kind of having a structure that you can bounce ideas off, or is it actually more stressful in a sense?**

No, it's easier, I think.

**Much easier?**

Any of those shows, all it ever needs is for one person to be saying something funny or interesting at any given moment. So you are sharing that burden immediately. And when it's working well, it's like the sort of feeling that a jazz musician might have, or that you might have with a set of mates down the pub when you're having a funny conversation, where it flows naturally like a funny conversation so I think it's easier than being up there on your own, yes.

**A big scandal about 20 years ago I remember when the Sun splashed saying these kind of shows are fixed because the guests are shown a kind of rough indication of what you might discuss.**

Yes.

**How does that work then? Are you just giving an overview of the topics, because clearly you can't predict the jokes you're going to crack, you're doing them in the moment.**

Well, I've not worked on one of the shows that you just described. I've only ever done Have I Got News for You, QI – on telly – and Would I Lie To You. Would I Lie To You obviously, you have to consult with researchers because that game is quite complex.

**And you was a guest on the shows, not part of the writing team.**

Yes. I've only been a panellist on Have I Got News For You. Obviously the chair has a script, but I mean they make no secret of that, because they'll do jokes about the autocue and stuff like that. The kind of shows that the Sun or whatever work was scandalised about I think re shows where people get exhaustively prepped; often non-comedy people, you know, often a pop star who is on a panel game gets primed with jokes, but I'd feel a bit insulted if they said to me, "Do you want us to prime you?" I mean, obviously on something like Have I Got News For You, you know what the main stories are, you know what the four big news stories are, so personally, I mean I'm sure everyone's different, I like to go in with... if I've got half a dozen good jokes in total about that week's news in my head... I mean I may never get to say... well, I'll probably say some of them, but I may not get to some of them, that's six I may not get to say.

**But you're looking for an opportunity to eave them in.**

They're a kind of little security blanket for me in terms of confidence, but once the show starts you're mostly spinning out of what other people are saying. The other thing I would say is it helps to have an opinion, I think. On a show like that you're more likely to be funny if you have an opinion about a story. So during the course of the week, I do find myself thinking, "What do I think about that?" because that sort of fosters jokes more naturally.

**Let's go back to... I'm determined to, as I say, run through your career. So we got to the point where you were just starting to leave Huddlines and John Lloyd was starting to raise your game as it were, and being a bit tough on you. What happened next?**

Well, John... I started at telly. I'd been kind of approached. And I suppose, partly because I would have been cheap in telly terms, I was a new writer emerging from radio so I would be less expensive than a veteran TV writer.

### **It's still all about money, isn't it?**

Yes, but that's fair enough, that's how everyone starts, so the very first TV job I had was the worst show I ever worked on, it was a one-off variety special for ITV which was disastrously and incompetently run, and died a horrible death on air. When I did it I thought, "What? Is it always like this?" because it was a very unhappy show... but I got asked to write for... the BBC had acquired Les Dawson, Les had done a brilliant series for Yorkshire for many years called Says Les, but he'd gone to the BBC, and the BBC had acquired a format from America called... I think it was called Alan King's Final Warning. Alan King was this kind of very gloomy comic who did social commentary mostly, and they thought this would be a great format for Les to come on and do material about everyday life and that we would segway into sketches, and the conceit of the show was that Les was in a kind of underground bunker, sheltering from the vicissitudes of modern life, and that through these sort of hidden cameras we could see these sketches. In the first series, it worked up to a point., and one of the joys of it was I got to write... I mean, Les wrote a lot of his own material, but this was monologues about air travel or things that he wouldn't necessarily have material about, so me and Terry Ravenscroft wrote monologue material for Les, which is fantastic, a great treat.

### **Was he got to work with?**

Yes! Les was pretty much the same on and off, you know, but in terms of presence you always felt the theatre could have fallen down around his ears and Les was sort of indestructible, you know. And of course in those days, he was the man never smiled. You know, at that stage of his career he was a droll who never smiled, which made him even funnier. But the problem we had was that when we wrote the sketches, unless the sketch was devastatingly brilliant, the sketches always suffered from not having Les in them. So in the second series we asked if Les could be in the sketches as a kind of everyman, and so he would... if the theme of the show was justice, you know, he would say, "The scales of justice are not always evenly balanced, as I found out myself this week," and then we go into a sketch where he was in court defending himself, you know, and for a couple of weeks that worked brilliantly, a couple of episodes. And Les was great in the sketches, but then around episode four, he fell off his lines a bit in one of the sketches, you know, he hadn't learnt it quite as well, and he started ad-libbing, you know, because he had this vast reservoir of gags in his head. And the audience loved it! And you just saw this little light bulb go on above Les's head where he thought, "Wait a second, they love me anyway! I don't have to do all this new material!" And he was right in a way. But that was great experience, it was great watching Les perform, it was lovely working with

Terry, was a great sort of personality, a great man, very good writer, very enthusiastic, good company, and there was a very good quite old school produce a guy called Peter Whitmore and there was a very good quite old-school producer, a guy called Peter Whitmore, but he was really good, you know, because I was a bit cocky and I think it was a good environment for me just to get a bit of that knocked off me a little bit. And then the other person that Terry wrote for was Marti Caine, who we loved, we thought she was great, and for us...

### **There is a blast from the past.**

Well, for us it was a huge frustration because we thought that Marti could be something that hadn't really happened on British telly up to that point, which was a kind of comedienne who did social material, you know, material about... so we would sit with her and she would tell us stories about when she had her first kid and stuff, you know, experiences she had in the hospital, and it was like gold dust, it was wonderful. She had a great kind of comic view of the world, you know, and then we would add material and build these monologues. So we did a monologue about her going into labour and giving birth. Which she did... in rehearsal she was doing brilliantly, but unfortunately the director, you know, the producer/director and I think to a certain extent Marti's agent, wanted to push her more towards the variety star. So gradually the comedy got squeezed out. Because Marti had a terrific voice and she could dance, she could do everything. And she was a lovely person and so it was very sad that we lost her as young as we did. And so that was a kind of a glimpse. So I had done those. But then John Lloyd went to telly in about '78, I don't know, '79. He rang up one day and said, "I'm in this office in TV Centre with a phone, and they've asked me to come up with a topical programme." And so basically John was assembling people he'd worked with, and then they paired John with Sean Hardie who was from current affairs, which was a really shrewd arranged marriage, and then it was a huge amount of fun. And that was the first time that I thought, "Actually this can be very exciting." You know, just sitting kicking ideas around.

### **And what did the show become?**

That was Not the Nine O'Clock News. Sorry I should have mentioned that! Yes, "That's very confusing, Andy, what are you talking about?" And what was great about it was because everyone was new to it, you could walk in and say, "I've written this sketch involves six dolphins." And whereas normally they would have just looked at you, John and Sean would read it and then go, "Yeah, okay, that's pretty funny. Yes, all right let's try that." And off you'd go and you film with dolphins and that was it. There was a kind of can-do sort of experimental...

### **That must have been the best job in the world.**

Yes, it was great – but it also got me interested in production, which meant that I started thinking, “Well it’d be quite nice to have the whole train set to play with.” So that was yes, for me personally, I mean for the industry it was a hugely important show, but it was also for me personally an important show.

**Did you have an ambition at that point to go airside? Did you want to be on screen or were you just purely...**

No, but I think I did start to think, “Oh it would be fun to be involved with the filming and the editing...” Yes, I was beginning to think I’d like to do a bit more of that, yes. At that stake I wasn’t thinking, “I want to go on screen,” no.

**And how long were you on Not the Nine O’Clock News for?**

Well, I did what turned out to be the pilot, which was actually a lot of... I did a lot of writing for that, stuff that then subsequently was under consideration for the first series. I worked on the first two series, and then at the end of the second series I really thought I wanted to do other stuff so I moved on then.

**What was next? This is quite an easy job because I just keep saying, “What’s next?”!**

It’s quite interesting because I’m probably getting it all wrong!

**Oh, someone will write in...**

Yes... well, the next big thing for me was a show called Who Dares Wins which we did as a late night comedy sketch show on Channel 4, and it was sort of founded by six writers and we formed a little company and then that evolved into this sort of successful late night show on Channel 4. Again, very experimental, very innovative, quite bold...

**Was Channel 4 quite a good environment at that time to experiment?**

A great environment. Because Jeremy Isaacs ran it, you know, he was the antithesis of the modern controller. The modern controller, it is all very risk assessed and marketed and all this...

**Numbers driven.**

And they’ve got a model, and ideas either fall inside their model or outside... Jeremy’s attitude seemed to be that it was just... it was meadowland, you know, he’d just chuck the seed out there and see what came up. So I don’t know if you remember Channel 4’s early schedule, you would switch on Channel 4 and you’d

have an hour about knitting followed by some scabrous late night comedy show. There was no rhyme or reason to it. By and large they left you to get on with it because they were a publisher/broadcaster who were using independents, and the independents were these little companies that were... many of them died in the end because they couldn't sustain it, and some of the Indies were composed of really talented independent-minded people and some of them were sort of cowboys who weren't going to last, but it meant there was a kind of wild west feel. Looking back I'm very proud of that show because we never rested on our laurels, we didn't do what a lot of sketch shows do which was fall back on the successful stock characters and keep bringing them around. I was doing a radio interview the other day and the journalist said it to me, "Oh I loved that show; Terry and Wang Wang." Well, these were two pandas that we used to have. Now they were the nearest we had to regular characters, and they appeared about five times across four series.

### **Exceptionally memorable though.**

Well, they were amazing costumes in that the first time that the audience saw them there was a kind of frisson of, "Oh my God, they've got pandas!" You know, extraordinarily realistic costumes.

### **The first time I became aware of your writing was Drop the Dead Donkey of course, which I still remain a huge fan of. I mean, that must have been... I mean, tell us about that.**

What was brilliant about it was that in those days you got time to plan. So they commissioned three episodes script-wise, three scripts. Then when we'd done three scripts they said, "All right, we'll commit to series." Which meant we started casting while we were writing. So we found the cast, you know, it was an exhaustive casting process and we really put the actors through in terms of getting them back and stuff. But it meant that we were writing that series with the cast very clearly in our minds, and then they gave us an off-air pilot as well, which... I mean, I don't think...

### **You never get that these days.**

Yes, not everyone gets one. So we got to do a complete dummy run for the show, so it meant that Liddy Oldroyd who was a fantastic director, got to do these experimental shooting style, which doesn't know experimental now but it was when Liddy did it, and she was the first to sort of take the cameras into the set and do long developing shots and stuff. And we got to do that. The actors got to expunge the nerves of doing that for that first experience of doing it in front of a studio audience, which is a very daunting thing to do, and then it meant a fortnight later we did the first show for real. So we hit the ground running, you know? So that took a lot, you know, there wasn't as much panic as people imagine because we had kind of learned a lot already by then.

**What was the genesis of the idea of this show? Did it come from you or did it did the network say, “We’d like something set in a newsroom that’s funny.”? How did it actually come about?**

No, it came from Guy Jenkin and me. Guy and I had worked a lot together on various shows, Guy been a very important contributing writer to shows like Not the Nine O’Clock News.

**Did you already think of him at this point as your writing partner?**

Spitting Image... well, we were really good mates and we’d we ended up sort of de facto trading stuff... the first time we actually had a joint credit was we used to write on a series called Shelley, that was created by Peter Tilbury for ITV, and Peter decided he didn’t want to write any more. So me, Guy and Barry Pilton were brought in to write episodes of Shelley and they wanted a Christmas special, and it was a toss-up about who could do it, so me and I thought, “Well, why don’t we do half each?” So we did a Christmas special where we worked out the plot and one of us wrote the first half, one wrote the second half, and then we cross-edited each other’s halves, and then that worked, and so we started working together. We briefly formed a little independent company and made a pilot for Central Television, which didn’t see the light of day.

**Of course, ITV had regions at this point.**

That’s right. And then Jimmy Mulville and Rory McGrath and Denise O’Donoghue, who we had worked with very successfully on Who Dares Wins, had formed a company to make a show called Chelmsford 123, and that was already a very well-run company. Denise had got it really up and firing and it was a proper company, you know, that knew what it was doing. So we thought, “Well, why don’t we do shows with them, because they know what they’re doing, and we can concentrate on the writing and not on any other stuff.”

**On the distractions.**

Yes. And then we wanted to do an office sitcom because we thought there hadn’t been a really good workplace sitcom maybe since The Rag Trade. And then the other thing we wanted to avoid was a situation where the broadcaster sat on the sitcom for ages, because we’d had an experience on Shelley where we’d written episodes around the time of the great yuppie boom and ITV had postponed the broadcasting because of the war, I think, I think because of the Falklands, and by the time they put it on air, which was like two and a half years after we’d written it, everyone and his wife had done jokes about yuppies, so I looked fantastically old-

fashioned, and we got reviewed saying, “Well, this looks tired.” And we were a bit peeved to put it mildly, so...

**So you deliberately made it topical so that they couldn't postpone the release.**

Partly, yes. And we'd had experience, because Who Dares Wins used to be done the night before transmission, it had a topical element to it, Not the Nine O'Clock News used to be done I think, was the night before transmission as well. So we did have some experience of it. So then we thought, “Well what if the work place, what if the currency they dealt in, was the news?” So it's still a classic workplace comedy with all the dynamics and the politics of an office, but it just so happens that what they're talking about is stuff that people would have seen on the Nine O'Clock News. And even though that our only concern... we used to leave about six or seven holes in the episode and then give those to the actors the day before or the day of the recording, and even though that was a comparatively small percentage of the actual show itself, it gave the show a real kind of buzz and electricity, you know, and it was really happy show.

**How many seasons did it run for? I can't remember.**

It ran for... was it five or six...

**It was a long time, wasn't it?**

Yes, it was nearly 70 shows because we did... a couple of the series we did very long runs. I think the highest was 13, then we did sort of 12, 11, you know. They were long runs, which again was the channel being quite bold and saying, “Right, you can have a long run.”

**Well actually, when you were saying there just about the show being recorded the day before broadcast, I immediately thought of like The News Quiz and Have I Got News for You and so on, they're all recorded the day before.**

Yes.

**My question formed in my mind then is do you think that panel shows now are a kind of way of saving money, because they get three or four funny people on the panel, Sandi Toksvig in the middle or Miles Jupp now, or Stephen Fry, and then it's a lot cheaper to produce isn't it, than having sets and ensemble casts.**

The economics of panel games are very attractive for broadcasters, yes.

**What's your favourite, then, if I can put it like that? Because I listen to The News Quiz, I'm still gutted that Sandi's left if I'm honest, even though Miles is a fantastic host.**

Yes, Miles is great.

**He's brilliant.**

Yes.

**But do you prepare differently for these shows, or do you just kind of as you just said earlier, kind of read the papers a few days before and then just turn up with a few gags in hand?**

Well, fundamentally it's the same prep, yes. Make sure you read the papers. Make sure what's in the news and then try and think of a couple. Yes, at least a handful of decent jokes about the big stories, yes.

**Because even though Have I Got News for You is a visual thing because it's on the TV, it's quite a speech-based comedy isn't it, banter and jokes?**

Yes. The only difference is, and I do remember a couple of times getting caught out like this, if I'm on a news quiz and Jeremy goes off into some brilliant kind of piece of comic fantasy about something, and I know, I know, I think, "Right, there's going to be at least a minute of this and it's going to be very good, the audience are going to enjoy it," and I kind of mentally switch off. I mean, I don't switch off completely but I relax and just listen, which is fine except of course on telly they can cut to you at any moment or they might use you as a cutaway, so you can't sort of doze off...

**Your eyes sort of glaze over...**

Yes, or you can't sort of doodle on your pad when someone's talking.

**Just before I go on to Outnumbered, which obviously I want to ask quite a bit about, what was it like at the end of Drop the Dead Donkey? Were you kind of... even though it was an amazing experience did you think, "I'm glad it's over," in the nicest possible way? Were you exhausted, or did you think there was more in it?**

What was terrific at one level about the ending of Drop the Dead Donkey was that me and Guy got to decide. Usually in broadcasting, someone else decides for you whether you're off air.

**You're fired!**

But we didn't want that to happen. We loved the show, we were very proud of it. We didn't want to be a show that one day got pulled, you know, we thought, "Well, let's..." like I said, I think we did 68 or 69 shows, I can't remember now, so we thought, "Well, let's bring it all to an end." So we did a last series which I think was seven shows, and we wrote storylines that went through all seven shows. And we managed to take all our characters off into the sunset in different ways, which creatively was really satisfying. I mean, I remember being sad watching the last episode being recorded.

### **Bittersweet.**

But I remember being sad and thinking... but also really pleased that we got to write the ending for those characters and give them a destination. We were ready to stop, you know, just because you want to write other stuff. You know, both as a pair and as individuals.

### **And did you already have ideas for the new stuff in mind at that point? Was there a seed at what Outnumbered would become then?**

Well, me and Guy, we've always got... as a pair, we've always got loads of mad ideas flying around, and normally – most of the time – they're on someone's desk, either about to be rejected or...

### **Commissioned?**

Well, no... yes, rarely! More often it's a slow maybe which turns into a no, but that's just fine, that's just the way it is. So we are always having ideas.

### **So are there other ideas you've thought of over the last 10, 20, 30 years where you were convinced they would have been amazing and you're still gutted 20 years later that commissioner X didn't...?**

There are, yes. We still get frustrated. We're like, "That would have worked! What were they thinking? Were they blind?" You know, and we'll never know who was right, but sometimes you get to bring one back. I mean, Outnumbered, it was quite a long journey for us from the very beginning.

### **What was the journey, then? Where did it come from?**

Well, it started... me and I had a couple of sessions where we thought, "Oh, let's just kick loads of mad ideas around," and it was a combination of Guy's kids were young around that time, my kids were older but it was recent enough for me to remember what it was like having small kids, and we were saying there's never been a show that captures the kind of chaos of life with small children, and there are very good

reasons for that to do with very good regulations about the employment of children, and then we started deconstructing it and thinking, “Well, what if we got rid of that? What if we got rid of that element of filming? What if we started stripping away all the things that we thought kids wouldn’t like?”

**So you hadn’t come up with characters at this point, you’re actually looking at the kind of meta...**

We looked at the mechanics. We said, “Right, we won’t have make-up, we won’t have big men in in puffa jackets shouting ‘Action.’ We won’t make them learn lines. We won’t make them stand in a fixed place because that’s where we’ve lit...” We basically kind of stripped out as much as we could of the process of filming.

**To make it as natural as possible and in the moment.**

Yes. And then we were having a conversation and we were talking, and I’d done a series called Bedtime and I’d had a scene in that where I’d use my daughter Isabel, and she was doing a scene with Kevin R. McNally, and I’d been chatting with Kevin before we were about to film it and I said, “I’ve never really been happy with any performance I’ve got out of a kid, and whenever I’ve looked at it it’s always been strangely un-kid like.” And Kevin said, “Don’t show her the script.” Just précis it for her and see how it comes out.” And he said, “And I’ll stick to the script and give her the answers,” and that’s what we did. It was very successful in terms of the naturalism, and so Guy said, “Well maybe we can magnify that technique and use it across a much broader sort of...”

**So the script becomes more bullet points than kind of word for word.**

Yes. Or they express... I mean, kids are so brilliant at learning sequences, you can talk to them a minute before you put them in front the camera and they’ll learn that sequence. But what you’ll get at those early ages, they’ll slightly customise the phrasing and they will express the thought you wrote but they’ll express it in a five-year-old’s way.

**And is that usually better?**

Well, it’s more real. It is funnier because it feels more real, and more spontaneous.

**Were you prepared for the phenomenon that it’s become?**

I think... I don’t know, I can’t talk for all writers but there’s a kind of defence mechanism that kicks in when you make... people often say to you, “Did you know it was going to be a hit?” and the answer to that is, “No.” You can’t know. All you can do is try to make it to the highest possible standard you can, so at least you’re happy

with yourself. So as long as me and Guy got it to a standard where we thought, “Well, we think that works, we’re really pleased with that,” whether it then takes off may be down to lots of factors, many of them to do with timing and circumstance that you have no control over. So I think what we did feel was that we’d done something completely original. When you look at those early shows they were completely unlike anything else that had been on. And I think the other thing we felt was that after it started going out, just by judging the reactions that we were getting and that we were hearing about, we did think that the show was taking root quite quickly. But beyond that, no.

**I just want to talk about stand up.**

Yes.

**What was the genesis of that? Because why would any sane human being stand on a stage in front of hundreds of people and try and make them laugh? That must be...**

Well, first of all I probably don’t fall into that category anyway! But for me it’s a great experience because writing, even directing and producing, you know, you’re kind of desk-bound or you’re office-bound or whatever, you don’t get to meet your audience.

**Connect with them.**

And particularly like the work I do on Radio 4 like Old Harry’s Game and stuff like that, yes, I mean the audience who come to the recordings but the people who are out there, the sort of heartland Radio 4 listeners, I don’t get to meet them. But when I go out on the road and do a one-man show, that’s pretty much... when I ask how many Radio 4 listeners are there in, that’s pretty much a forest of hands.

**Does your voice get recognised? Do people say, “Is that Satan?”**

Yes, my voice does get recognised, yes. I’ve walked into shops and have people say, “Oh, you’re that you’re that bloke.” To me, my voice sounds completely normal, you know, it doesn’t sound unusual, but I’m sure yours as well, through the sounding board of my head it sounds very average, but in fact, the first time I heard it back I can remember walking past Geoffrey Perkins’ office and he was playing a sketch, and I heard a sort of fragment of it and I said, “What’s that?” He said, “Well, that’s you. That’s your sketch that you did.”

**And you just didn’t recognise yourself.**

And I genuinely said to him, "Are you sure you're playing at the right speed?" Because I thought my voice sounded so unnatural, I thought there must be some kind of technical problem with his machine.

**I can't listen to these podcasts.**

No.

**Even if I click on one accidentally I think, "Who's that guy?"**

Yes. And why's he talking like that?

**That's right!**

But yes, my voice does get recognised a lot.

**And do you get recognised in the street? I mean, it's a strange question to ask but how famous are you? Because I mean, if I saw you on the street I'd say, "There's Andy Hamilton."**

On a scale of one to 10...

**And of course I'm a massive News Quiz listener and all this stuff, so I'd recognise you.**

Yes. People like you would recognise me. To the vast rump of people, I get recognised but only as 'that bloke off that thing', you know?

**So they don't know your name and they don't quite know your face.**

They know they know me. If I'm lucky they'll say, "Oh, you're on Mock the Week," and I'll go, "No, Mock the Week," and they'll go, "Oh, you're on the other one." You know, you get that. The most bizarre one is when they know they you're your face but they don't connect you with... you know, you're out of context; they don't connect you with the television. So then you get really weird ones.

**People who think they know you because they're the next... I did that with Alan Titchmarsh once in York station. I wasn't wearing my glasses and I thought, "I'm sure he's my neighbour, I'll just spark up a conversation with him." Just to be friendly, you know, because I'll seem rude. And he looked at me like I was an alien! And then I thought... as soon as I realised I thought, "Oh, definitely he is Alan Titchmarsh."**

Haha. Oh, right. Yes. No, I've had people convinced that they went to school with me in Dundee, or there was a very posh bloke stopped me on the train once and said, "We board our dogs in your kennels, don't we?" And I said, "No, you don't."

**Are you ever tempted to play along?**

No, but the great thing was that I said, "No, no I don't think so," and he said, "I think we do!" The worst one – which I've done on stage, I often tell people about – is some drunks on a train were hunting for my name and then I had one of them say, "Oh, I know, it's Dr Harold Shipman!" Yes. So. But it's fine, it's fine. I mean, a lot of the Radio 4 mob are very nice and it's a lovely... it's a very lucky life, to have people come up and say they enjoy what you do is... I mean, it's not something that happens to most people in most walks of life.

**Can I ask about your book, then?**

Yes.

**Because it's your first novel, and you've... I mean, tell me about the book, but also tell me ... you've crowdfunded it, haven't you? There are a couple of unique things about this book.**

Yes, well it is it is weird, because here am I, an avowed kind of relic of the last century who doesn't have a mobile phone, thinks that computers are...

**No email either?**

... no. Witchcraft.

**Wow.**

Well, I have to engage in e-mail, but luckily I have a very patient and lovely wife who sort of mediates between me and the modern world. If I didn't have Libby, I think I'd probably starve.

**Yes, because it was Libby we emailed to get you on.**

Yes. No, she's crucially important. But I'm doing it for a company called Unbound. It's an online publishing company that does crowdfunding, and it's a brilliant model that they have, which is that you create a web page on their website, you describe your book, you put a sample up so people can get a sense of what the book is, and basically say to people, "Do you want to buy a copy? Do you want to buy a nice hardback copy?"

**There's like escalating levels of contribution, isn't there?**

Yes. Or, you know, for a bit more do you want to come to the launch party, and there's kind of novelty pledges and I've done that I'll descend on their dinner party and eat their food... and but fundamentally the vast majority of it is advance sales really. It's funding the production of the book through advance, a form of advance sales, which means that the big risk element...

**That a traditional publisher would have taken back in the day.**

Yes. Which is, "What if I lose money?" "What if the production of the book is more than we take in receipts?" That big risk disappears because unless they get the advance sales and the pledging, then the book doesn't go into production. So that makes them a much more kind of... I think a much more adventurous and forward-thinking kind of publishing house. But it's a very 18th century sort of idea.

**Yes, it's quite an old idea actually.**

It is, that you reach out to patrons who think, "Yes, I'd like to see that." And that is fundamentally what it is, but it's using the new technologies to get in touch with your natural audience.

**So what was the motivation for writing the book. And tell us about the book as well.**

Well, I started it years ago. The motivation was I had a weird experience, which I won't go into here, where someone pretended to be me.

**I'm not interviewing that person now, am I?**

No, no, no!

**That was my attempt at comedy...**

I don't think so! That was a slightly weird experience, and it made me start thinking about the relationship that we have with celebrity and stuff like that, and then and then this idea formed in my head of an actor in a very successful soap, a national treasure type actor, he's started phoning in his life a bit, he's kind of given up on people a bit and he's sort of allowed himself to drift into a state of sort of lazy cynicism. Not a fantastically sympathetic person, and he makes a very bad mistake which I won't go into. And then he makes an even worse mistake and then he ends up really... really the wrong, seriously the wrong side of public opinion. But the irony is, I began this story, I began work on this seven, eight years ago, long before you had the procession of disgraced celebs and national treasures that we have now. So it feels very current and topical.

**But actually was ahead of its time when you came up with the idea.**

Yes. I mean, I just I just wrote this storyline and thought, "Well what if it all went horribly wrong for someone like this because he made certain errors of judgment, he's not a criminal per se, but he sort of makes a few errors and he's a bit egocentric."

**When the idea came into your head did you have the kind of the beginning, middle and end already there, popped in fully-formed? Because my wife's a novelist and she says that when she writes she sets out with wanting to strike certain notes and emotions.**

Yes.

**But she doesn't actually know how the book is going to end.**

No. I didn't. The book – it's a lovely feeling when that happens, I mean, it's happened to be a bit in TV. I did a series called Underworld for Channel 4 where you find the story kind of is leading you, rather than you guiding the story and the character... it's a sort of transcendental state where it seems to sort of naturally be going in certain directions. The story started as a play but it was kind of not quite the right size for a play, the story that I had, and it didn't have... it felt like one act rather than three. So I then looked at it and thought, "Well, I really like this story and I'm interested in this character and the satellite characters in his life, but in a way it needs to be a bigger story." And the novel gave me the freedom to turn it into a much bigger story.

**What's next? Are you going to carry on writing more novels? Is there going to be another hit show? Are you going to carry on until you drop dead, kind of Tommy Cooper, style?**

Haha.

**Or are you looking forward to a retirement three years from now?**

No, I won't retire. I don't see the point of that. I don't know what's next! What I hope is next is something new, and that's what I like about the book is it's a completely new way of doing things. But I'd like to write a stage musical, I'd like to do.... you know, I'm writing a claymation script at the moment. I have no way of knowing which of these will eventually definitely get made, and a lot of them won't, but I just keep doing different things. I've got a review about the history of religion that I want to write... there's no shortage of things I want to write, it's just carving out the opportunities to do the convincing people, because I'm always risking other people's

money on stuff, you know, that's part of the fun of being a writer is you are you are risking other people's money so you have the you have to try and convince them.

**So even as you are at the top of your game, you would think that you would have less uncertainty but it seems to me that it's always going to be an uncertain thing. It's just the life you chose.**

There's no way around uncertainty for any writer, even one who is successful. There is uncertainty for plumbers as well and for... you know, it's just a different kind of uncertainty. So I don't think there's any way around that. You just have to accept it.

**Andy, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you very much.**

Thank you.