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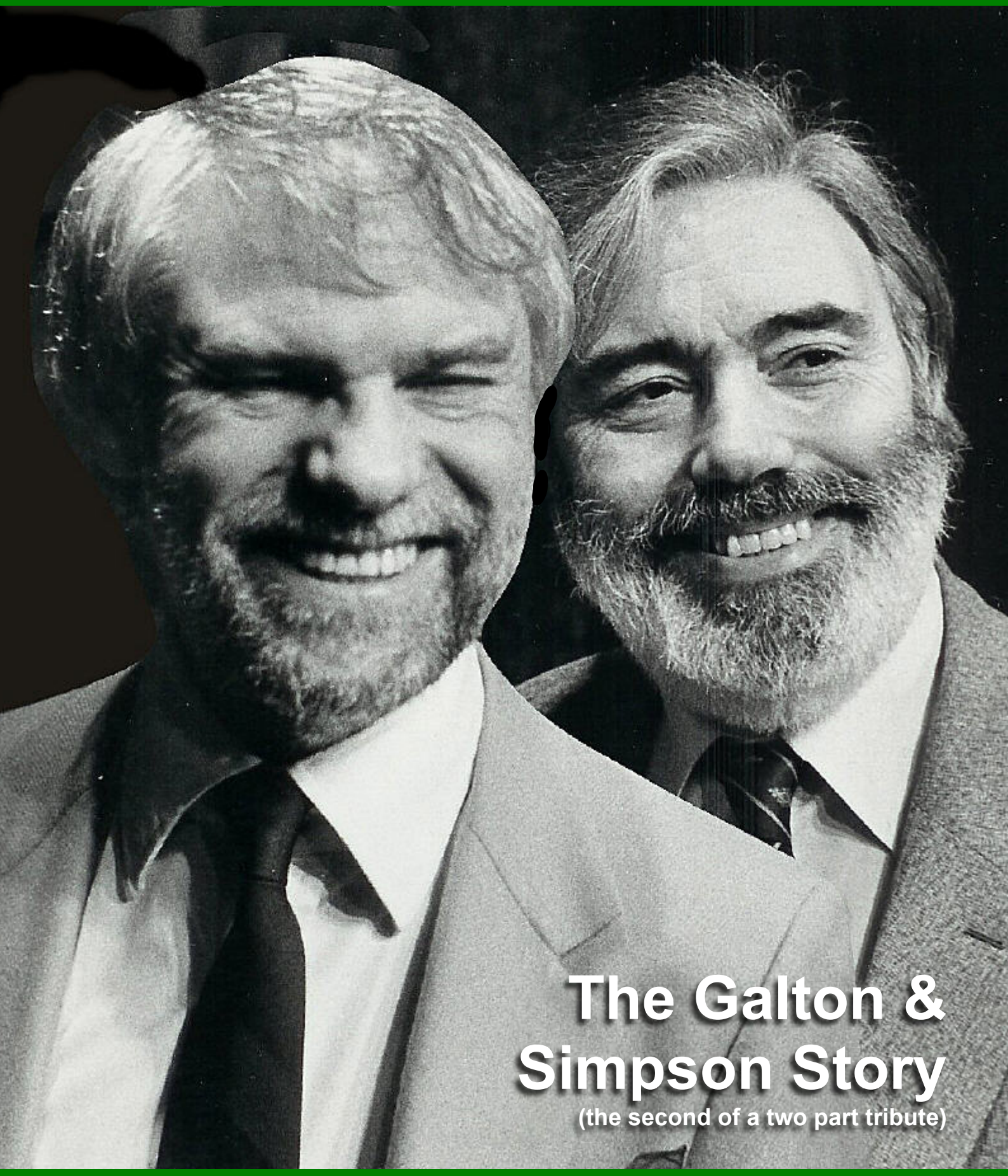


The Galton & Simpson Story

(the second of a two part tribute)

The Online Magazine of the Tony Hancock Archives

Introduction

We are pleased to make available this, the second part of our two part tribute to Ray Galton and Alan Simpson. Part two continues their story from the mid 1950s with 'Hancock's Half Hour' and moves on to talk about the Comedy Playhouses, 'Steptoe and Son', and other work which readers may perhaps be slightly less familiar with.

Regular visitors to our website will hopefully continue to appreciate its value as a web-based archive resource for Tony Hancock enthusiasts and historians. We're delighted that Hancock biographers and the BBC (no less!) have found the site and our resources of use for their research and work. We continue to build the site, and add new material to it as new items and new facts about Hancock come to light, for example previously unknown theatre dates; or rare releases of his material that had escaped our attention.

Running and maintaining a website does not come free however, so any revenue raised from this magazine will be put in to the THA. Producing the magazine has also been a further outlet for our Hancock fandom. We've enjoyed working on it, and we very much hope that you enjoy reading it too!

Thank you for your support.

www.tonyhancockarchives.org.uk

THE GALTON & SIMPSON STORY

Researched & written by Elaine Schollar

PART TWO

TO THE PALACE - VIA EAST CHEAM

Ray Galton (left) & Alan Simpson - 60 years in the comedy business

FROM SHEPHERD'S BUSH TO KENSINGTON

Part one of our tribute to Ray and Alan took their story up to the mid 1950's and the birth of 'Hancock's Half Hour', and concluded with an original article from the TV Mirror by William Evans, from 2 July 1956, in which he reports on a visit to Galton and Simpson's offices in Shepherd's Bush. Just over a year later, and William Evans has revisited the boys in their new offices in Kensington. The following article, which originally appeared in the TV Mirror of 9 November 1957, focuses on the script-writing process.

SCRIPTS… THEY'RE TV's BIGGEST PROBLEM

The new crop of autumn TV comedy series has already been subjected to attack by critics and viewers. If you like a new series you naturally praise the comedian-but if you're disappointed, do you blame the scriptwriters? And who are this élite band of well-paid craftsmen, who operate in an open market that surprisingly attracts little genuine talent to challenge the few who have made the grade?

To find the answers I first called at the lush Kensington HQ of a firm that started in a quiet way over a Shepherd's Bush greengrocers. Associated London Scripts, formed three years ago by Spike Milligan, Eric Sykes, Alan Simpson and Ray Galton has added more than a dozen names to the ranks of this mystifying yet lucrative industry. Londoners Simpson (he was once in the shipping business) and Galton (formerly in the building trade) are both in their thirties, and currently writing the BBC's Hancock's Half Hour.

(Above) Regulars from the radio team of 'Hancock's Half Hour'.1954 - 1959
From top to bottom - Sid James, Tony Hancock, Bill Kerr and Kenneth Williams.

Said Alan Simpson : "This year we're doing thirty-three shows, thirteen on TV and twenty on radio. In addition we've done three other single shows and odd sketches for various artists, so that the total period works out at about twenty hours of scripts a year. When you think that an average play runs two hours we're writing the equivalent of ten plays a year. Whereas people like Terence Rattigan and the other great playwrights do one, possibly two plays a year."
I asked Ray Galton what he thought about the trend to blame the writers if

viewers are disappointed in their favourite comedian's new show. "That's true these days, but I think it's good - for it shows at last that scriptwriters are being recognised as important. Any comic is only as good as his script. Some, if they are very good, will extract more than is there, and an inferior one -won't get as much from it as he should. It's a matter of combination - if a good artist has a good script there should be a great show."

What about the money? Alan Simpson : "Depending on the status of the writer, he will be paid between £150 and £400 for a half hour's TV show. But it wouldn't go up to £400 at once - in fact there are very few writers today on that mark. The fees for radio are lower, but you get repeat opportunities you don't get with TV. On the other hand, that's pure gravy - they don't guarantee a programme will be repeated."

Despite an undoubted open market in the field of comedy writing there are plenty of hopefuls who daily try to break in. Usually, their material just isn't right. "Three years ago we advertised for writers," said Ray Galton, "and we've got about fourteen in the agency now". Alan Simpson: "Yes, we get up to two hundred people a year submitting scripts with the idea of becoming writers. And out of the fourteen in the office we've got about four who came to us that way. In three years that's four out of about six hundred. I'm told the BBC scripts department finds an even smaller percentage."

Tony Hancock receiving reassuring words from Alan and Ray

In the next office Johnny Speight, a former insurance man who writes The Max Wall Show was hard at work with John Antrobus, who came to the firm from Sandhurst. They write for The Arthur Haynes Show too. They stopped work when I mentioned the critics. "Of course, some of them help us - Peter Black usually has something constructive to say - but I think a lot of them," said Johnny Speight, "have either a corny appreciation of humour or think their public has. But I think myself there's a lot wrong with TV comedy - even in the shows I'm on."

Did he feel that he always put his best into his work? "To some extent I think we're not allowed to put our best into it. For one thing we're restricted by traditions. TV is a completely new comedy medium, but most comics have come from variety and mainly from lifelong habits can't forget its limitations. They've got big voices and exaggerated gestures, and they all want gags."
I asked Johnny about the Max Wall series. "Max has been a variety artist most of his life. He's one of the funniest men in the country and will be a great TV comic once he performs purely for TV and not half-and-half. There are many small things you could never do on a variety stage which can be very funny."
Would he be writing that sort of thing into the present series?
"It's very difficult because the writer hasn't really got the status. He's very important when someone wants the scripts but once they've been written he's not consulted at all. He could have more to do with a show's direction. Often the producer, who has got all sorts of things to worry about, including lighting and cameras, hasn't got time to direct the comedy."

Can the writer go to rehearsals? "Yes, but you find yourself sitting around watching. There are very few producers who ask for your opinion. In fact some resent you making any suggestions. They think a script should be written from beginning to end and, without a word being changed, it should be funny. When you see it being enacted you see where improvements could be made."
Backing his colleague, John Antrobus told me: "Often you're fighting all the time to protect the original conception of a sketch, and the strength of the comedy in it. You find a comedian will try to put a funny idea on top of a funny idea, and after they've rehearsed it a couple of times they can't see it's funny. You've got to go on reassuring them." (TV Mirror, 9 Nov 1957)

TRANSITION TO TELEVISION

So at the time of the article, Galton and Simpson were writing 'Hancock's Half Hour' for both radio and television. Ultimately there were to be six series for radio, which ran from 1954 to 1959, and when it transferred to television in 1956, six series were also written for this medium, with the final seventh series, called simply 'Hancock', finishing in 1961.

It was an amazing feat to be churning out such high quality scripts on a regular basis. But as Alan Simpson was later to recall, "Nobody told us it couldn't be done!"

Other than the sheer volume of material and scripts they were having to produce, the transition to writing for television appears not to have been especially difficult for Ray and Alan. Ray recalls the advice they were given by Eric Sykes, who had made the move himself a year earlier. Using the example of a bucket, Ray recalls they were advised "On radio, you would say 'Pick up that bucket'. On television you would say, 'Pick that up'. Right OK, we got it! And that was it! That was all our tuition in to television!"

For the actors, whereas Sid James had initially found working on radio in front of a studio audience uncomfortable, wearing a hat to cover his face as much as possible during the broadcasts, he moved comfortably back to the screen

A rare shot of Tony Hancock - 'The Bedsitter' rehearsal (1961)

and was able to give the less experienced Hancock advice about shots and camera angles. The transition to television also resulted in the downsizing of the original 'Hancock's Half Hour' cast. Although Kenneth Williams and Hattie Jacques did appear in a few of the earlier television broadcasts, ultimately it was the Hancock/James combination that was to flourish. The earliest shows on television – the majority of which sadly no longer exist – were not especially well received by the critics. But the ratings climbed steadily, the programme grew in popularity, and it ultimately became the yardstick against which subsequent British sitcoms came to be measured.

The reason for the move to television was due in part to competition the BBC now faced from ITV, which had started broadcasting in September 1955. Hancock however, was contracted first of all to do a series for ITV, part of a deal he had brokered with Jack Hylton so as to be freed from his obligation to do a stage review for Hylton that he wasn't enjoying. Eric Sykes scripted the first of the shows, but when Hancock asked if Ray and Alan could write the remaining shows, the BBC initially refused permission – Galton and Simpson being under exclusive contract to the corporation. The BBC eventually relented however, when it was brought to their attention that it was in Tony's best interests – and by default the BBC's – that his regular writers be allowed to write for him. Ray and Alan were thus allowed to write the remaining ITV shows for Hancock – on condition they weren't given the credit. On the plus side however, ITV paid Galton and Simpson much more than the BBC for their scriptwriting – salaries the BBC ultimately had to match!

SCRIPTWRITERS OF THE YEAR

The success of 'Hancock's Half Hour' was such that in 1959, Galton and Simpson were awarded 'Scriptwriters of the Year' by the prestigious Guild of TV Producers and Directors, whilst Tony Hancock was awarded 'Comedian of the Year'. By 1960 however, Hancock was wanting to 'move on', he was wanting to develop the TV character Galton and Simpson had built for him, and he also felt the need to end what was fast becoming seen as a double act with Sid James. The Hancock character was moved out of East Cheam to Earls Court; the Homburg hat was cast aside; and Sid was dropped from what was to become the last series Hancock did for the BBC. Many were unhappy with the decision. But it was a decision Ray and Alan understood. Sid James had a career outside of 'Hancock's Half Hour', making up to ten films a year; but Hancock's main vehicle was his TV series, and he wanted to prove he could shine on his own, not simply as part of a double act. He was also keen to make a name internationally for himself, and saw the Hancock character of the earlier series as restricting these ambitions.

HANCOCK ALONE

Whilst understanding Hancock's desire to end the 'double act', Galton and Simpson, perhaps somewhat mischievously, scripted the first programme of the new series to include no supporting cast. Although more commonly known as 'The Bedsitter', the show was also called 'Hancock Alone'. There was a huge amount of dialogue to learn, especially for one who found it so difficult to learn lines. Ray and Alan half expected Hancock to baulk at the idea. But having read the script through, he loved it, and the challenge it offered – and ended up putting in a superb performance. The subsequent episodes from this series were also a success – and include some of the best known and most loved shows that Hancock was to make.

Ray and Alan (standing) on the film set of 'The Rebel' 1960

Prior to this final series, Hancock had starred in the film 'The Rebel' (1960), the screenplay for which had been penned by Galton and Simpson. It was quite successful, and gave Hancock a taste of international stardom. When his 1961 TV series ended, Hancock asked Ray and Alan to write a further film for him. They delivered script after script – unpaid – until he eventually admitted that he didn't want them to write for him anymore. Hancock parted company from Ray and Alan.

COMEDY PLAYHOUSE

It's widely accepted that Hancock's career went downhill from this point, but for Ray and Alan, having been some ten years in the business, by 1961 they had firmly established themselves as one of Britain's most successful comedy writing partnerships ever. Towards the end of 1960, they wrote a series of 'Citizen James' for the BBC, which starred Sid James alongside Bill Kerr and Liz Fraser.

(Above) Bill Kerr, Liz Fraser and Sid James star in 'Citizen James' (BBC television 1960)

Then in 1961, Tom Sloan, head of light entertainment at the BBC, came up with the idea of 'Comedy Playhouse'. This was to be a series of unrelated one-off comedies, each episode starring different actors, perhaps well-known stars of the time, or new up and coming talent. It was also to be a vehicle for a number of scriptwriters, both new and old, to showcase their ability, but it was Galton and Simpson who kicked off the series. So confident was Tom Sloan in their ability that he commissioned them to write the entire first two series, ultimately some16 episodes, spanning the period December 1961 to April 1963.

Although Galton and Simpson had been given quite a bit of creative freedom in writing 'Hancock's Half Hour' - the character didn't for example have a fixed job or profession – the freedom they were given with regards to Comedy Playhouse was unprecedented. They could write about whatever they wanted; they could produce the shows if they wanted; and they could cast whoever they wanted -

including themselves. Comedy Playhouse also gave Ray and Alan the chance to write specifically for actors as opposed to comedians – the former of whom, unlike comedians, were less prone to scan the scripts for the laughs – they were much more inclined to deliver the lines they were given.

The first Comedy Playhouse, 'Clicquot et Fils' (15/12/1961) starred Eric Sykes and Warren Mitchell. The fourth in the series was called 'The Offer' and starred Harry H Corbett and Wilfrid Brambell. It was born out of much deliberating and followed a barren period where the two scriptwriters were bereft of ideas, until they came up with what initially seemed the ludicrous notion of a show about two rag and bone men. The first writing just had the two arguing. But as soon as Galton and Simpson decided on the relationship between the two – namely father and son – the heart of the programme was established.

STEPTOE AND SON

Harry H Corbett, Ray Galton & Alan Simpson in conversation

At rehearsals for 'The Offer', which came to be broadcast on 5 January 1962, Ray recalls Tom Sloan telling them, "You know what you've got here. It's a series." They refused to countenance the idea, not wanting to get stuck with having to write a sitcom series again. They finally relented on condition Brambell and Corbett both agreed they would do it. They never anticipated that two well respected actors would want to get cast in a sitcom series. What they hadn't realised however, was that the rates of pay for sitcom were far superior to drama – and both Corbett and Brambell jumped at the chance!

As well as 'Steptoe and Son', Comedy Playhouse spawned a further 26 sit-coms, and during the 1960's and 1970's, over 100 single 'playlets' were written. The theme music for both Steptoe and Son ('Old Ned') and Comedy Playhouse ('Happy Joe') was composed by Ron Grainer. (Further information about Ron

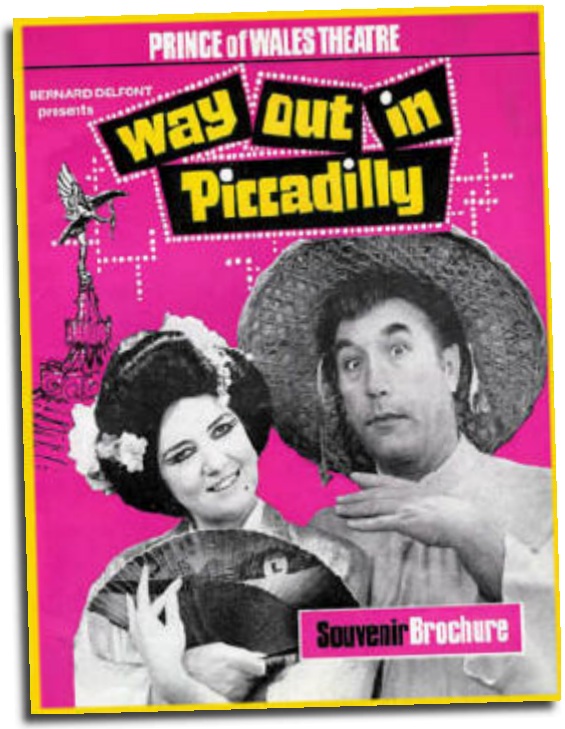
Grainer can be found on the following website, where it is currently also possible to listen to some of the theme tunes he composed):
www.last.fm/music/Ron+Grainer/

Between 1962 and 1974, eight TV series of 'Steptoe and Son' were written. Incidentally, the name 'Steptoe' came from a quaint photographic shop in Richmond at that time, 'Steptoe and Figge'. The first four series were broadcast between 1962 and 1965, but after the second series, it looked possible that Wilfrid Brambell was leaving the show. He had been cast in a big New York musical 'Kelly', which was expected to run for two years. Unfortunately for Brambell – though fortunately for Steptoe fans – it closed after just one performance, and Brambell returned to the UK and to the set of Steptoe and Son.

Steptoe and Son was unique in that it portrayed tragedy through a comedic glass. It could cover issues such as death, funerals, poverty, misery, frustration and failed romances. Not topics you would immediately associate with comedy! But the series was immensely popular and won Galton and Simpson the Writers' Guild Award in both 1962 and 1963. The following year they won the John Logie Baird award for their outstanding contribution to television.

"YOU NEVER WANTED TO CHANGE A SYLLABLE"

A single script could take Ray and Alan up to three weeks to complete. But of the Comedy Playhouses they wrote, 'Impasse' (15/3/1963) took less than four hours – although it had taken a week to get the inspiration for the idea. This came from Graham Stark who told them of an amusing news article he had read about two drivers meeting down a narrow country lane, both of whom refuse to back up. They cleverly developed the concept so the episode also became a comment on society - specifically the British class system - and the casting included Leslie Phillips as an upper class Rolls Royce driver coming face to face with Bernard Cribbens portraying the working class driver of an old jalopy. As Bernard Cribbens was unable to drive, a 'stunt' man had to perform his driving scenes. Cribbens recalls the brilliance of the Galton and Simpson scripts: "You never felt that you wanted to change a syllable."



In 1963, Ray and Alan wrote the screenplay for the film 'The Wrong Arm of the Law' for Peter Sellers. A year later, they finally got to write a series for Frankie Howerd, something they had initially wanted to do after 'Hancock'. Howerd's career had been on the wane in the early sixties, and Galton and Simpson had been advised against writing for him, but their faith in the comedian was justified and his career experienced resurgence. In 1966 they wrote 'Way Out in Piccadilly', a revue at the Prince of Wales theatre, which starred Howerd and Cilla Black, and which was highly successful, running

to the end of 1967 and winning Howerd the title of 'Show Business Personality of the Year'.

Steptoe and Son was adapted for radio between 1966 and 1973, and in the early 1970's, it returned to television, this time in colour. The new run finished in 1974, but included a number of classic episodes, for example 'The Desperate Hours', which co-starred Leonard Rossiter and J G Devlin as two escaped convicts from nearby Wormwood Scrubs prison, who happen upon Steptoe and Son's abode whilst on the run – a prison of a different kind. A fine example of comedy drama, with some terrific performances from all the actors.

In 1972 and 1973 Galton and Simpson took Steptoe and Son to the big screen, the first film winning them the Writers' Guild Award for best screenplay. The format of the show sold extensively abroad, including to America in the guise of 'Sandford and Son'. Ray and Alan wrote the first few of these, but the series soon evolved its own way.

In 1969, Ray and Alan wrote a series of six comedies, the first of which, 'The Suit', starring Leslie Phillips, ended up as a comedy series on BBC some four years later. They wrote a couple of specials for Frankie Howerd in 1971; and then in 1972 wrote 'Clochmerle', a series adapted out of a novel by Gabriel Chevalier. In 1974 they wrote a one off comedy for Les Dawson, 'Holiday with Strings', for the Montreux Film Festival. Although it didn't win, it was popular and spawned the series 'Dawson's Weekly' for Yorkshire television in 1975. Then in 1976, Yorkshire TV decided to resurrect the comedy playhouse idea, which led to seven playlets.

One of these included the gem 'Car along the Pass' (1977) starring Arthur Lowe (right) as a xenophobic, pompous Englishman who gets trapped with his long-suffering wife and a number of foreigners in a car in the Swiss alps – a show somewhat akin in its concept to Hancock in 'The Lift'. Earlier in the 1970's, Galton and Simpson had indeed been asked if they would consider reviving a number of the old Hancock scripts, with Arthur Lowe playing the Hancock character and James Beck (also of Dad's Army fame) in the Sid James' role. Only one was made, 'The Economy Drive', as sadly the venture was cut short by James Beck's tragic sudden death aged just 44 in 1973. Understandably, Lowe didn't wish to continue the project.

It was also in 1977 that Alan Simpson decided to retire. Ray Galton continued to work, teaming up for example with Johnny Speight and John Antrobus on

Alan Simpson, Les Dawson and Ray Galton

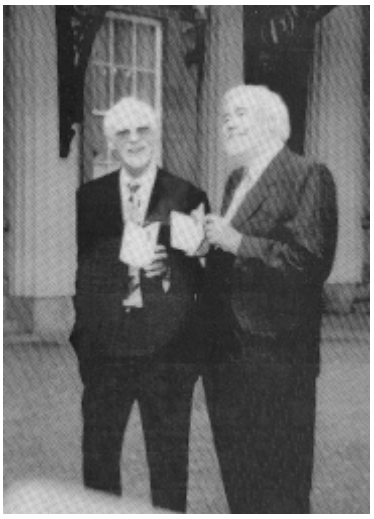
various projects, but Ray and Alan did re-unite professionally to update some of their Comedy Playhouses and 'Hancock' scripts for the comedian Paul Merton in 1996 and 1997. The venture was not a critical success – the Hancock scripts in particular had been written specifically for Tony and with the Hancock character in mind; and any actor or comedian would have found it a tall order to match the success of the originals.

Ray Galton, along with John Antrobus, also resurrected Steptoe and Son, for the theatre, in the form of 'Murder in Oil Drum Lane' (2005). It starred Jake Nightingale as Harold and Harry Dickman as Albert, and the plot was based on the premise of Harold's often repeated threat in the original series to kill his father. The actors put in excellent performances, and the show received a number of very favourable reviews and was a hit with audiences. The Daily Telegraph described it as being "...a perfect night for nostalgia seekers, but the show deserves to win a new, young audience, too, for its comedy is both timeless and classic."

So much of what Ray and Alan have written is indeed timeless and classic, and

interest in their work continues unabated. They have been the subject of documentaries and are still very much in demand for interviews, despite their most famous work having been written some 35, 40 and 50 years ago. Success initially came with 'Hancock's Half Hour', which had all the right ingredients by way of cast, producer, director, and even theme music, and followed on with 'Steptoe and Son' in a similar vein. Through the medium of the actors, Ray and Alan portray and cleverly reflect life back at us, with humour, through our TV screens and radios - and nowadays our computers, too. The mediums for broadcast may have evolved, but the fundamental premise on which a lot of their comedy was based – namely what human nature is like, and how people interact – has remained largely unaltered, hence the timelessness and durability of their work.

Ray and Alan arrived at just the right time on the comedy writing scene; they met and worked with just the right people; and by so doing, developed the comedy scene in this country, bringing enjoyment to millions of people in the process. In 1997, they were awarded the Writers' Guild Lifetime Achievement Award. Then at the turn of the century, in the 2000 New Year's Honours List, they were both awarded OBEs for services to television comedy drama (right). Their work is highly acclaimed and continues to be viewed and listened to several decades after it was first penned and originally broadcast. There is little doubt that this will continue to be the case.



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A number of interesting interviews with Ray and Alan can be found on www.youtube.com

Or visit Ray and Alan's website at www.galtonandsimpson.com