

REUNION 2023: A LITERARY REVIEW

Guests at our reunion dinner in Solihull this September were delighted and enthralled by our guest of honour, Diane Morgan. Actor, writer, director, stand-up comic, and Hancock super-fan, she also contributed to the recent Hancock documentary. Very Nearly an Armful. Gabriel Egan recounts his experiences of that day.

What do we leave behind in the world after we are gone? Shakespeare's Mark Antony thinks he knows: "The evil that men do lives after them", he says, while the good they do ends with their death and is buried "with their bones" (Julius Caesar Act 3 Scene 2). We can imagine Hancock's response: "Rubbish! Mark Antony has spent too long out in the East with Cleopatra, that's his trouble." The truth, as amply illustrated by the Tony Hancock Appreciation Society's Annual Reunion Dinner in Solihull on 9 September 2023, is exactly the opposite of Mark Antony's view: the good that men do lives after them. The Society exists to preserve the legacy of Tony Hancock and promote the enjoyment of his works. In two distinct ways, this year's Reunion Dinner showed the good that lives on after Hancock's untimely death. First, through the material objects of his life -- recordings, scripts, photographs, posters, and personal effects -- and secondly through his extraordinary influence on the funniest entertainers of today.

The event took place at the Voco St John's Hotel in Solihull, barely three miles from where Hancock was born in Hall Green. Outside was an unseasonable 86°F (or 30°C in new money) but the hotel's powerful air-conditioning kept safe both Hancock's Astrakhan coat and homburg hat, as well as the many printed artifacts on display. From 3pm, members were able to browse and pore over these treasures from the Society's archive, including important new acquisitions from a generous donation by the family of the private collector Adrian Last, who died in 2020. The materials donated included Hancock's membership card for the Pink Pussycat private club in Sydney, scripts for radio and television shows, and the poster for his film Call Me Genius, the title under which The Rebel was distributed in America.

Video recordings of two episodes of BBC Television's Hancock's Half Hour were played for the gathered membership: 12 Angry Men, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson's hilarious pastiche of Sidney Lumet's 1957 legal drama, and the ever-fresh The Blood Donor. These were colourised versions made from the original 16mm black-and-white kinescope telerecordings. Technology has advanced considerably since the Hal Roach Studios' 1980s efforts that scandalised a generation of fans and critics with crude

colourisings of Laurel and Hardy's films, decried by some as cultural vandalism. The Hancock colourisings were far from crude, and someone unaware of their origin would probably assume that the programmes had originally been made in colour. Defenders of the process claim that it makes important cultural artifacts more acceptable to modern audiences who might otherwise ignore them. But is there something about the Hancock material that actually suits a black-and-white world? It was a point raised by the evening's guest of honour, as we shall see.

Next, Simon Hodder-Williams gave an illustrated talk about the professional career of his father, Christopher. Or rather the careers, since Christopher Hodder-Williams achieved success first as a musician and songwriter and later as a prose-fiction author. In the 1950s, Hodder-Williams provided music for, and appeared in, The Tony Hancock Show (a sketch-format programme) on the newly launched Independent Television (or 'ITV'). Simon gave members a taste of his father's contributions to this show as a pianist, called 'Mr Clench', and of the multi-talented June Whitfield singing some of his songs, and he made a powerful case for the importance of his father's work.

After an excellent three-course dinner and wine, members settled for the evening's highlight: the actor, comedian, and writer Diane Morgan in conversation with Victoria Thomas and Adam McLean. Morgan claims to have landed her first television role, in Phoenix Nights, by writing a note to its creator, Peter Kay, saying, "I'm from Bolton too. Give me a job". After performing her trademark deadpan delivery as ill-informed reporter Philomena Cunk in Charlie Brooker's Weekly Wipe and two series of Cunk on ..., Morgan wrote, directed, and starred in the cult classic Mandy, in each 15-minute episode of which Mandy Carter fails in a new endeavour to reach her life goals with minimal personal effort. Thomas and McLean are the creators of the documentary Tony Hancock: Very Nearly An Armful, commissioned by and recently broadcast on Gold TV, in which Jack Dee explored previously unseen materials that throw light on Hancock's career and achievement. Morgan was one of the contributors to the documentary, and in conversation, she explained her obsession with Hancock. When most 12-year-old girls were listening to and putting up pictures of their favourite pop bands, she was devoted to comedians, and Hancock in particular. It was her father's influence, she explained, in a household where the talent of making one another laugh was at a premium.

It was not just the jokes in Hancock's scripts that appealed to Morgan: the

character of this lugubrious man himself spoke to her. There is an attitude towards life, an optimistic yearning that cannot be extinguished by its recurrent encounters with crushing disappointment, that Morgan, like other comedians, finds deeply moving in Hancock's work. Taking questions first from Thomas and McLean and then from the floor, Morgan revealed herself to be deeply knowledgeable about Hancock's life and work and able to put her finger on the comic pulse that makes life's tragic panorama so compellingly funny. The darkness of this vision, she argued, needs the black-and-white medium and she is unconvinced that colourisation is helpful or necessary. Hancock's world really is monochrome, and what Galton and Simpson dramatised was his unceasing efforts to give it colour. For Morgan, the finest television episode is The Economy Drive, in which the financial consequences of what should have been a glamorous European holiday must be recouped by cutting more and more of the treats that make life bearable.

When she wants to cheer herself up, Morgan says she always puts on a Hancock. Some will say the same of her own comic creations, especially Mandy Carter. This year's Reunion Dinner was particularly well attended, and Morgan herself was doubtless a draw. After regaling members about her life and views on Hancock, she spent an extraordinarily long time in generously obliging countless requests for signings and photographs. In person, she was charmingly hilarious, and in her work, she upholds the best traditions of her profession. Mark Antony was quite wrong about legacies. Reflecting fondly on his old friend the comedian Yorick, Hamlet gets it right in recalling his "flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?" (Hamlet Act 5 Scene 1). The tables roared in Solihull, first at the recordings of Hancock and then at the live presence of Diane Morgan illustrating just what it is to comedie and why we love and remember those who do it.

Our thanks extend to so many who made this fantastic event possible, but particular thanks must go to: Adam & Vicky; Simon Hodder-Williams for his insightful talk, Diane Morgan, who was incredibly generous with her time for our members; and to Ros Dawson, whose tireless work was instrumental in ensuring the event went off without a hitch.

Prof. Gabriel Egan
Professor of
Shakespeare Studies

