

Throughout the month of May Women In Entertainment have organised a festival — Women Live — which will take the form of events all over the country focussing on work which challenges the position of women working in the entertainment industry. The festival has been organised by professional performers, directors, producers, designers, writers, administrators, film-makers, musicians and technicians — all women. Here, four women look at the impact made by the women's movement and by individual women on comedy, on the rock music scene, on the theatre, and on the film industry.

Sheila Hancock started acting in the theatre with Joan Littlewood and became widely known for her performance in the television comedy series. *The Rag Trade*. She talks to Sue Beardon about her early career as a comedienne, her attempt to break with this image, and her experiences today acting with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Most people remember you from The Rag Trade but I understand you started working with Joan Littlewood?

Yes. My career didn't start with *The Rag Trade*. It started way before that. I spent ten years in what was called weekly rep in those days. I went to RADA in the 50s at a time when the archetypal British actress was Claire Bloom, and I just didn't fit into any category. I was very tall, I was not conventionally good looking, I had a slight accent — a considerable accent — and girls like me just didn't fit in anywhere. Anyway, I did this weekly rep lark, which was fairly tatty, and you were very, very lowly paid — in fact very often you paid them for the privilege of working. I was playing every age-range — my appearance helped in that way because I could play all ages. Then I just couldn't get out of it.

How did you get involved with Joan Littlewood?

Well I auditioned for Joan, and we responded to one another immediately. She took me right back to all the things I'd been fighting to stop in myself. She encouraged my accent back again. She loved the way I looked. She thought I was divine, she thought I was funny, and she made me value myself. She called me her little clown.

Do you think comedy was a way out of the dilemma of not fitting into the conventional feminine role?

Partly, but also it was just the nature of the part that I played with her, and my nature coming out, I suppose, inasmuch as I find comedy in a lot of life, and as most of our

An interview with SHEILA HANCOCK

work with her was improvisation and stemmed from yourself, it could be true to say that I had found comedy as a way of coping with life. In fact one of my initial remembrances of the theatrical experience was when I was in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* at primary school, and I wanted to play Snow White with a passion, but I wasn't pretty enough so they gave me Dopey. My sister sewed a bit onto the end of my red dressing gown and made me a costume which I kept tripping over. And on the first night — or afternoon — that we did it I fell over and I got a belting laugh from all the mums and dads; and Snow White didn't get a look in from then on because I fell all over the stage throughout the whole performance. I think that was my first recognition that if I got laughs, people would notice me whether I was beautiful or not.

So Joan Littlewood liberated you in a sense?

Very much so, yes. Joan I think is just... a genius. I think she's the most brilliant director I've ever worked with in my life, and I've worked with some of the good ones. She was in a class of her own. She was extraordinary because she was very possessive, with good reason, because as soon as someone got successful they got whisked away. (This was when Joan got popular — unfortunately I wasn't with her at the beginning, I wish to God I had been.) So she had a sort of possessive quality, but she was unique in making you value yourself. That was the incredible thing she did to me. In a profession where I had been nothing but a misfit struggling to be successful, Joan made me see that I could do it by being myself. That was an extraordinary revelation. Up until that point I'd been wearing flat shoes and trying to have my hair cut according to the fashion and do all those things; and Joan suddenly said, 'no, that doesn't suit you, you be what you are'.

And she said it to everybody else.

So how did The Rag Trade follow on from that?

That was the usual thing that happens when you do one sort of part: everybody offers you exactly the same part, and the first part that I had a big success with in the West End was *Make me an Offer* with Joan, which was based on a Wolf Mankiewicz story, playing a gawky cockney girl; so then every part I was offered was working class. And I think *The Rag Trade* came straight off from the director seeing me do that, and it was — or became — a carbon copy of it.

How did you feel about doing that — which was, I suppose, a bit of a stereotype female?

Well let me say that in those days I had no concept of what a female stereotype meant. It was not until I read *The Female Eunuch*. You see, I'm of a difficult generation, a generation that was caught up in the women's liberation movement at a time when I had been brought up to believe in totally different things. Suddenly these people came along and said, 'that's all wrong'. It wasn't too late for me to change, because I was in a career where it was possible, but for most women it was impossible and therefore the only reaction to that is to turn round and say, 'these people are talking bloody rubbish' — if you're going to survive. That's what a lot of women do, and I absolutely understand that.

But for me it did totally change my attitude, so after I was 30 the roles I took and my objectives in the business altered completely. When I'd just entered *The Rag Trade* I would have said, 'what do you mean?' Now I do see that of course it was a stereotype. But nevertheless it was a stereotype that existed, and still does, whether we like it or not.

It must have been challenging — like Coronation Street — to have working class people portrayed. . .

. . . and women, being funny . . . I think the enormous success of *The Rag Trade* was that it was mainly the women getting the laughs,

particularly little Esme Cannon, who played a character called Little Lil. She'd been in the business for years and years, but suddenly she got this tremendous success . . . and Miriam with the 'everybody out' thing . . . women being funny was a startling thing at that time.

/ was going to ask you about women comedians. There's been a lot of talk about whether women can be funny? Have women got a sense of humour?

I think women have always been good in comedy acting roles but — and it comes back to what is true of all areas for women — it's getting up the courage that makes it difficult. It takes a damn sight more courage to stand up on a stage and ask for a laugh, than it does to act out a drama where you don't have to have an audible response. If you do a comedy, or you stand up to do a comedy act, and nobody laughs, you've failed.

I think that, as in all areas, it will come — and is coming, with people like Victoria Woods — when people have got the courage to stand up and say, 'right, here I am, take it', and then be funny. Because you've got to have that arrogance. All music hall comics like Max Miller and those people have got this cheeky I-don't-care-whether-you-laugh-at-me-or-not attitude. Women very often go on saying, 'please laugh at me, please love me', and all that. You've got to not care if you're loved or not, I think, to be a comic.

Don't you think it's very hard for women to say 'I might be fat, I might be ugly, but just laugh at me — that's fine'?

It is. But when they do it, it works marvellously. There's a few American comedienness who are doing it now, who have been wildly successful at sending up their

own physical deficiencies, in the same way that men to a certain extent have sent *them* up for it, and they're doing it themselves and turning on the men. That's pretty clever actually. In life it's always a good way of stopping people laughing, if you get in first, isn't it? What I like about Victoria Woods is that she's now doing to men, something that men have been doing for a long time to women — she is taking an aggressive stance in her comedy, which I think, is a tremendous step forward.

It's about time, isn't it?

Yes, I'm delighted to see it. I want to see more women doing comedy because I think comedy can change attitudes possibly more than anything. I once tried — very unsuccessfully — to do a serious programme called *Now Seriously It's Sheila Hancock*, when I became conscious that I was getting this label — it wasn't that I turned against it, but I just lost interest in being Mr Digby's darling and the Bedsit Girl.

In that series you interviewed Germaine Greer. I think you were one of the first famous showbiz personalities who came out and said, 'I'm interested in this women's liberation lark'.

Yes, that's right . . . And we got torn apart by the press . . . The only comforting thing about that programme — and I treasure it — was that I got a load of mail. It was sent out late at night on BBC2, incidentally — they weren't taking any risks; but the response I got from women was fantastic. I got the biggest mail for that out of all the television programmes I did. But at that time the BBC were not prepared to follow it through. I'd destroyed what they had built me up as, and I've never worked for them since. So I did make little stands in my little way, but by so

doing, I did flummox them and I wasn't employed as a result.

So was that why you moved away from that area, or were you thinking of moving away from it anyway?

No, it wasn't really a conscious thing. I just didn't get any work there so I concentrated on the theatre. Television is very fickle: I was enormously successful at one time, I was as much known as Penelope Keith is now. But I'm sure it'll happen to Penny Keith as well. Fashions change, and if you're clever you'll keep very aware of that while you're in this big successful telly thing. You'll hedge your bets in another medium.

Today you are acting with the Royal Shakespeare company, aren't you also doing some directing?

Yes I am. I was attached to the Cambridge Theatre Company — mainly to learn about it — and I loved that, and it's an area I'd very much like to go in to, an area where women have a great deal to offer. It's the directors who will change things — slightly. I find that very much with the RSC, which is one of the reasons I'm with them — because I want to direct.

Directing presents a particular problem, because I think women do have a different style from men. It requires you pulling together a number of people and taking a leadership role, which women tend to do in a very different way from men, and a way in which a lot of male actors resent and find hard to understand. Another area of resistance is the technical side. I had the usual marvellous compliment from my last artistic director: he very sweetly said to me one day, 'it's been great working with you, and somebody asked me the other day what it was like working with you, and I said — "better than any man I've worked with" '. It's the usual thing. And, love'im, he meant it as a compliment, and indeed it was a compliment. But with the technical people, I haven't yet found a way of dealing with it other than by falling back on 'poor little woman — help me', or pretending I know more than I do.

It's the 'poor little women — help me' that I despise myself most for. And the way I'm going to get round that is that I'm going to learn as much as them. That's what you've got to do, because you can't faff around when you're lighting a show — it's no good being silly. You've got to know about it — and I intend to find out. I'm in the process of finding out.

