



Minder. Arthur (George Cole) and Terry (Dennis Waterman) on the campaign trail for Arthur in a by-election.

A CLASS OF ITS OWN

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Arthur Daley and Terry McCann are rapidly becoming the most successful double act on television at the moment. With the sad death of Eric Morecambe the *Minder* Christmas special will be the highlight of many people's festive viewing. The series has slipped into the popular memory with remarkable ease, to such a degree that you can now talk of doing 'an Arthur Daley' and his voiceover can be heard advertising Mobil's latest money game.

The force of the series comes from the constant re-working of the contradictions of the characters' class positions. To put it at its most simple, Arthur Daley has all the trappings of the middle class entrepreneur and Terry his paid working class labourer. However the series has developed to such a degree that this picture becomes ridiculous to any viewer. The tension is created through the difference between the pretence of the characters and their actual accomplishment. So Arthur has all the stereotyped symbols of success - his car, his suits and his club - and yet can never quite convince the audience of his right to belong to the middle classes. You only have to look at his club, The Winchester, to realise that all is not what it appears. Arthur does not belong to a select West End gentleman's club but rather chooses to drink in an East End after hours drinking club. The fact that he refers to it as 'his club' may give some of his business acquaintances the wrong idea but he cannot be held responsible for what people think.

This leads on to the other tension which

works very successfully throughout the series: the moral dimension. There is a strong distinction between the respectable characters and the disreputable ones. To complicate the issue there is no easy correlation between class position and respectability. Some of the biggest villains are the most affluent members of the cast. Again Arthur's position is central to this as he is not dishonest enough to be completely fraudulent and although keen to indulge in sharp practice is quite often the victim himself. The defining feature of Arthur's behaviour is that there is no malice in his actions, he might be conning people out of their money but they are the sort of people who can afford it. He might sell falsely labelled goods but the people who are buying them do not expect them to be genuine. The series adopts a very tough line on those people who are seen to be exploiting the poor or the defenceless, with Arthur and Terry carrying the banner of the little person for revenge and justice. The constant desire to find a new angle somewhere nearly within the law pushes the series on and provides the rationale for the programme but, in itself, it is not enough to explain the popularity of the series.

It is the way it deals with the class positions of the characters that provides the edge to the drama. Arthur's aspirations to the middle class come unstuck every time he is in the presence of any one with money - or the appearance of money. He is shown as being uncomfortable, using the

wrong phrases and desperately trying to keep up with the Joneses. There was a good example of this in an episode where Arthur found himself involved in a smuggling operation and dealing with a self-styled commander. At the yacht club the two members order pink gins, Arthur declines and orders a pink vodka instead. The humour comes from the failure to handle the social skills of the middle class. It reasserts Arthur's roots with the working class and distances him from the smooth operating corruption of the middle class. Terry, on the other hand, admits to knowing nothing of the ways of sophisticated society, often mocking the pretensions of Arthur and his well-to-do friends. The humour here works by laughing with the character rather than at the person in a difficult situation and it pulls the audience into a closer identification with the hero.

Terry is very much a part of the people. He is part of the local community and everybody knows him as a friend, as a mate. This is a particular construction of a part of London in which the series develops. If the planners are worried about the lost sense of community in large cities, they should take encouragement from *Minder*. Here is a network of people completely integrated and self supporting - if people go outside the community it is by choice not because they could not find whatever they wanted within the network. Somebody always knows a bloke who can fix you up with just what you are looking for. Usually there is already a supply in one of Arthur's lock-ups but if not it can be found for you at just the right price. It is an idea of London which has been seen before. It is the community of the Ealing Films, the comradeship from the days of *The Passport to Pimlico* and the spirit of the postwar films is echoed strongly. The image produced is one of a weary, but still essentially happy, working class. Put upon but not downtrodden. The characters of the people shine through and reinforce the will to carry on. Arthur is just a 1980s equivalent of the Blackmarket spiv - so convincingly portrayed by George Cole in his younger days in the St Trinian's films.

These historical references also inform other contemporary forms of popular culture. Everyone knows that not all Londoners are Cockneys but there is a recognisable London voice, and a style of presentation, which means London to the millions of people outside the capital. This means that you can get away with Chas and Dave being described as 'Rockney' because they

capture the old style of popular working class entertainment of the sing song in the pub. Jim Davison plays on the same identification. All these instances, and there are many others from Max Bygraves to the recreation of Flanagan and Allen, help to produce an image of London as a busy city with bustling communities.

When you see the community, Terry with his mates, and Arthur with all his old contacts, you have a sense of unity. There is also a basis for progression and social mobility. But the community also underpins the warning, mobility is not easy and is full of traps. Terry stands by as the commentator on all the passing trends and fads. He stoically watches as people appear to change but remain the same, move on only to return. The community is essentially self policing. Where the police do appear they are not welcome and they are certainly not a part of the local community. The nearest equivalents to the way the police are portrayed is the way most people feel about the tax man - and Arthur feels about the VAT inspector in particular. The police are bound by the formal code of the law, which is not subtle enough or flexible enough to cope with the pressures of the community. There can be hard definitions of what is acceptable only in the abstract terms of the law and these need delicate translation to the reality of the *Minder's* view of the world.

It is much tidier to deal with problems quickly and cleanly with Terry's fists than it is to take people to the courts which takes too long and does not have the same impact. The role of violence in the series is twofold: it both resolves conflict and it also underpins the masculine strengths of Terry's character. It is a man's world and the masculine virtues are emphasised in Terry's character. He is tough, he is strong and he is brave. In the logic of the series, this also makes him something else - he is sexually desirable. The early series, more so than the recent one, regularly cast Terry into the arms of adoring young women. The sexuality of the series has become one of its dominant features. Terry and the 'birds' and Arthur with the never-seen-but-often-heard-about 'her indoors' live out the two stereotypes of male sexuality. More, Terry's good fortune is envied by the older married man and this reinforces the sexist style of the series. Some of this tension is defused in joking exchanges but it is fundamentally reinforcing the worst traditions of gender relations in society. Yet this again cannot be removed from the

context of the community without disturbing the familiar image which has been created.

It is the familiarity of the audience with the image and with the unease of the characters which, I think, can explain the popularity of the series. You have the experience of being put down by those who are, supposedly, your social superiors to draw on. You have agonised for the correct thing to say and got it wrong. What *Minder* offers you is the chance to see someone work out the angles and come out of it ahead of the game. There is a sense in which you are watching someone who could be you finally putting the record straight on your behalf. How many times have you thought of the witty response when it is too late to use it? Half the time Terry and Arthur do too. But then there is the second half of the programme for them to get even. They are pushing at the conventions of society and occasionally achieving something. The humour is *risque* and cheeky, especially where it is directed at outside authority. But they survive. It is a weekly witnessing of the survival of the downtrodden - with enormous contradictions. But that is why *Minder* is entertaining.