

YES AGAIN, PRIME MINISTER



Henry Goodman and David Haig in the stage adaptation of *Yes, Minister*

Thursday September 30, 2010

By Robert Gore Langton

Twenty-two years after they last wrote together, old chums Jonathan Lynn and Sir Antony Jay sat down to see if *Yes Prime Minister* would work as a stage show. They holed up for a week in Somerset. “We thought if we couldn’t come up with anything, we’d have a lovely time drinking good claret and forget about it.”

Within an hour they’d come up with an outline plot. A 48-hour-long crisis at

Chequers. A government facing disaster with a threadbare majority, a collapsing pound, an oil-rich Central Asian state whose foreign secretary wants HM government to supply him with an underage girl for sex. As comedy writers, they were back in business. Before they knew it, they had typed the unvarying last line of the script: “*Yes Prime Minister.*”

For the stage show in the West End, the roles famously played by Paul Eddington (as the Rt Hon Jim Hacker) and Nigel Hawthorne (Sir Humphrey Appleby) – both now dead – between 1980 and 1988 are being taken on stage by David Haig and Henry Goodman.

If a week in politics is a long time, 22 years is an aeon. No one surely could ever have invented the scandal that engulfed Westminster last year. MPs claiming for duck houses and their husbands’ porn videos. You couldn’t make it up. Were the writers utterly defeated by the beyond-satire expenses fiasco?

“No, just terribly amused,” says Jay, now 70. “We are after all comedy writers. It’s comedy we love. We found when we were writing *Yes Minister* years ago that if it wasn’t funny enough it was always because we hadn’t done enough research.”

Reality was always upstaging their own inventions. So they stuck to real incidents, garnered from pinstriped sources in Whitehall. After the show started MPs and permanent secretaries would get in touch with ideas. Contacts were never a problem. Jay had been a TV journalist since the late Fifties and once made a series with Harold Wilson on prime ministers.

“We realised that the more you went into it, the weirder and funnier things got. If we’d done an episode about a schizophrenic climbing the walls of Buckingham Palace and bumming a fag off the Queen, the BBC would have sent it back and said: ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ But it happened.

The funniest episodes of *Yes Minister* were all things that actually happened. We had

one set in a Muslim country where no alcohol was allowed, so the British delegation set up a communications room, smuggled in whisky in the red boxes and were constantly going in and coming out with very pale 'orange juice'."

Co-writer Lynn is also directing the stage show, having forged a career as a comedy film director in Hollywood in the intervening years. The play has a few modernisations to keep it contemporary. But not many.

"Sir Humphrey has evolved in the play to reflect the increase in special advisers and it's a little harder for him than it used to be. But while he may lose battles he never loses the war. Jim is extremely good at PR because his job these days is to be head of public relations for the government, as Blair was. He's tougher and more experienced. But essentially the relationship is the same. It's the system that makes the relationship what it is. It's the servant outwitting the master, a comedy formula that goes right back in time."

So what has changed? "Our joint view is that nothing has changed really," says Lynn. "There is this myth that special advisers are now frightfully important. But [Alastair] Campbell's importance was overstated by the media because he was such a powerful character.

"Look back over the past 50 years and there were always special advisers: Marcia Williams, Joe Haines, Bernard Ingham. The myth grew up that they were running government. It's not true. The government is still run by full-time civil servants. Politicians are temporary amateurs and they've too much else to do – like getting re-elected."

"Yes, running the country is way down the list of priorities," says Jay. "At the top is being re-elected, their image and what posterity will say about them."

The series was conceived back in the Callaghan era but it was Mrs Thatcher who gave it its great publicity coup. "We asked ourselves when we started it: 'Will people think we are just making it up?'" says Jay. "She was marvellous PR for us. She publicised the existence of the show and its authenticity. When it was on and she was going out, she would pop her head around the door of her private office to check it was being recorded. Someone told me she actually had erotic dreams about Sir Humphrey!"

The politicians had to laugh at Yes Minister. But as Lynn quickly recognised, the show was being used in a very Jim Hacker fashion. "Mrs Thatcher's great interest in it was a desire to be seen to have a sense of humour." Did she not genuinely enjoy it?

"I think she enjoyed half of it, all the criticisms of the civil service. Politicians said: 'It's very funny – you've got the civil service absolutely right.' The civil servants would say: 'Yup, you've got the politicians spot on,'" chuckles Lynn.

But the principle was the same. Jim Hacker was always obsessed not with 'will this work?' but 'how will it look?'" says Jay. "In the play we've focused on the small majority problem. Don't forget, it's not the Cameron-Clegg government we are writing about, it's the Hacker government." Do they mention a hung parliament? "Yes, as in hanging's too good for them."

People have a sense of the TV show as dated because of programmes such as The Thick Of It. "The Thick Of It was so foul-mouthed and ours was such a nice clean show that it perhaps is now seen as not particularly hard-hitting. But it wasn't always comfortable to watch," says Lynn. "We had an episode in which the MoD was selling arms to the Italian Red Brigade who had recently assassinated the Italian prime minister in reality. We came up with 11 good reasons to sell arms to terrorists – that's not cosy. Nor was our episode about why smokers needed to die at the then current

rate.”

Yes Prime Minister never wagged the finger. It didn't offer prescriptions or satirical attacks on political events and proposals. “We're not like Dean Swift, who famously suggested that eating babies would solve the Irish famine,” says Lynn. “But unlike Tony, I don't regard it as non-satirical either. It's just that we were not interested in attacking specific people. We are just saying: ‘Look how absurd the system is.’”

The show has its roots in the business training films of Video Arts, the company Jay set up with John Cleese. After John Cleese left to write Fawlty Towers, Jay and Lynn wrote them together. “Tony's great inspiration was to realise that most training films were so boring because they only showed you how to do something in the right way,” says Lynn. “They could be really funny if you showed the wrong way. With Yes Minister we were unwittingly writing a series of training films for government ministers on how not to do it.”

Their partnership is as close as Hacker's to Sir Humphrey – and a lot less adversarial. They never do anything one of them isn't happy with. They can expect lots of advice for a sequel during the show's London run. As Lynn says: “Like everyone, MPs love playing the expert.”

Yes Prime Minister has just opened at London's Gielgud Theatre.

<http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/202595/-Yes-again-Prime-Minister>