

Even after 50 years, comedy writing is a 'woke' in progress...

Likely Lads creators Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais reveal how 'cancel culture' forced them to think again about their work

IT'S BEEN close to 100 degrees in parts of California over the past few weeks. But for two Britons, who have spent the best part of half-a-century living deep in the Hollywood Hills, it's a temperature change of a different kind that's been making them hot under the collar.

"I just couldn't believe it. It did drive me a bit crazy when I heard," says Dick Clement, who with his writing partner Ian La Frenais, created some of the most beloved TV shows and films of the past 50 years including *The Likely Lads*, *Porridge* and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*.

He is referring, of course, to UKTV's controversial decision (since overturned) to remove the iconic Germans episode of *Fawlty Towers* from its streaming service amid claims of racism.

Now both 83, Clement and La Frenais are busier than ever; working over Facetime from their homes in Los Angeles, and still creating hits – most recently the Beatles-inspired musical film *Across The Universe*. But when it comes to the huge sea change in political correctness that has resulted in classic TV shows being "cancelled" and comedians publicly castigated for their historic material, the duo admit the new sense of "wokeness" has affected their writing.

"We're censuring ourselves all the time when we write now and thinking about things differently," admits Ian. "I have found myself looking through a script Dick and I have been working

By Rob Crossan

on and having to say, 'Wait a minute, where's the diversity in this script?'"

One wonders if classics such as *The Likely Lads* would even be commissioned these days. One thing is certain, says Ian: "We can't just write white, male parts and that's a good thing. But I think it looks just as bad to specify a character as 'Asian', or 'Afro-American' in a script as it looks forced."

The pair were asked to remove a passage of dialogue in their *Porridge* reboot, starring Kevin Bishop, that involved the mention of slavery. "I



THE LIKELY LADS: James Bolam and Rodney Bewes

think that decision was probably the right one but you have to be aware," says Dick.

"We have a script ready to go based in Heston, all about a VAT scam that happened in 2000. The cast of characters is hugely diverse because of the story. But ultimately, it does have to be the story that guides you on these things."

Asked what makes an appalling character like Basil Fawlty so funny, Ian replies: "In two words – social class. Everything is defined by social class and every gradation and nuance



of comedy in this country is about class. From Fawlty Towers (pictured right) to Shameless – it’s all about class.”

The kickback such as it is against this new sensitivity has come from an unlikely source of late with the BBC’s new director-general Tim Davie admitting there is too much Left-wing comedy on the network, with content unfairly biased against the Tories, Trump and Brexit. It’s a policy which Clement and La Frenais find more than a little confusing.

“Well, first you’ve got to find these Right-wing comics,” says Dick. “Can you pick comedians on the basis of appeasing the political ticket or do you put them on telly because they’re funny? I’d quite like to see an Alf Garnett type on the telly now but I don’t think the BBC would be brave enough to let a character like that loose in case people took him seriously! People like him were expressing a blue collar, Right-wing viewpoint which was very valuable.”

It all seems a far cry from the duo’s first forays into writing back in the early 1960s when they created Bob and Terry, two working-class Geordies whose main hobbies were drinking, arguing and attempting to seduce girls in *The Likely Lads*.

It’s an era they recently returned to with their *My Generation* film.

Narrated by Michael Caine, the documentary featured interviews with Paul McCartney, David Bailey,



Mary Quant and Roger Daltrey. It feels like a fond, final farewell to that decade made by those who survived and the pair admit to feeling some sadness

about the generation that has succeeded it. “The ’60s was the first era where the future was in the hands of the young rather than the old,” says Ian. “It was a remarkable decade, especially for Dick and I because we were young. It was a remarkable change from the grey awfulness of the Fifties in Britain.

“This system that had gone unquestioned for centuries was suddenly eroded. The sadness is that, especially with social media at their fingertips, the younger generation should have that same attitude – that the future belongs to us.

“But I don’t see the rebellions coming out of colleges. The reality is that the US election is going to be two men in their late 70s challenging for President.”

Their entertaining memoir, *More Than Likely*, is published today in paperback and provides an extraordinary, anecdote-packed sweep through their remarkable career, with chapters devoted to their working (and social) relationships with everyone from Richard Burton to Peter Sellers and George Best to Ava Gardner.

It’s every bit the equal to their *My Generation* film in terms of documenting what, with hindsight, appears to be a golden age of stage and screen talent. When I ask them

who they'd most want to bring back from the grave and work with again, their answers, surprisingly, aren't the usual suspects of Burton, Sellers or Brando.

"I'd have to bring Ronnie Barker back," says Dick. "Ronnie was such a bright man. He was a writer himself and we literally never had a cross word. It was such a creative relationship."

Ian's choice isn't for an actor at all. "I'd bring back George Harrison," he reveals. "We worked with his production company Handmade Films and made a film called Water with Michael Caine in the 1980s. His contribution would

20th century's biggest stars have been so productive. In their book, the pair recall a particularly grim breakfast meeting with the notoriously irascible Van Morrison with a view to his potential involvement in the movie that would become *The Commitments*.

Presented with a script, based on the Roddy Doyle novel about a struggling soul band in Dublin, the Irish troubadour briskly described the content as "s****" and asked if the fictional band in the movie would play his music rather than soul covers. Thankfully, Morrison's absence didn't dent the resulting movie which was a critical and commercial hit.

Dick continues: "I remember us doing a screen adaption of Tom Sharpe's book *Wilt* where the producer cast Mel Smith and Griff Rhys Jones in the lead roles. It tilted the whole thing away from what it originally

was. Then suddenly, after treating us like partners, he went out and a new script got written! We took our names off the project in the end – that was a pretty horrible experience."

With a movie about legendary English pop group The Kinks in the pipeline for next year and a raft of other projects on the go, the pair have no plans to retire despite their advanced years, nor to leave their long-time home in the Hollywood Hills even as the temperature continues to rise. "Britain was

always our safety net – and still is," insists Ian. "We moved to LA and in the Eighties we weren't getting far here at all. So we spent our days writing *Auf Wiedersehen*, *Pet* or *Spender* or *Lovejoy*. That was an incredible advantage and privilege.

"We only did a couple of features in the States and came very close to going home. But it was *Auf Wiedersehen*, *Pet* that enabled us to stay in America. Things like that re-bolster your confidence and that confidence helped us get *The Rock* and *Never Say Never Again* and then *The Commitments*."

Now in their seventh decade of working together, the duo are almost as funny as some of the characters they've created.

When it comes to packing up sticks and moving back to England, their conversations could come straight out of the mouths of *The Likely Lads'* Bob and Terry some half-a-century ago.

Says Ian: "My wife says the two of us can work anywhere in the world. But she forgets about the time difference! One of us would have to get up in the middle of the night to talk to the other.

"I'm not sure which one of us that would be."

"We both know it would be me," replies Dick with a sigh.

● *More Than Likely* by Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais (W&N, £9.99) is published today.

Call Express Bookshop on 01872 562310 or order via expressbookshop.co.uk UK delivery is £2.95, orders over £12.99 free



ORIGINAL PORRIDGE: The classic prison sitcom with Ronnie Barker, Fulton Mackay and Richard Beckinsale

have continued to be something really important if he was still with us I think. And I loved how excitable he could be, even as a Beatle.

"I remember going to a Travelling Wilburys recording session and he beckoned me to walk with him into this huge house we were in. I followed him across a hall, he opened up a door and Bob Dylan was sitting there. George whispered to me, 'Look! It's Bob Dylan!' Despite all his success he was still capable of being wowed by his heroes."

Not all their encounters with the

Picture: GETTY

