

COMEDY WRITING LEGENDS SAY THEY MUST BE POLITICALLY CORRECT



LOOKING BACK: Ian La Frenais, left, and Dick Clement. Below right, new book and the pair in 1978

LADS AND LASSES: Terry (James Bolam), Rose (Kate Storey), Bob (Rodney Bewes) and June (Janet Kelly)

by ROB CROSSAN

CLASSIC sitcom writers Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais admit “wokeness” has forced them to think differently about comedy.

The pair have created some of the most beloved TV shows and films of the last 50 years, from *Porridge* to *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* to *The Likely Lads* and *The Commitments*.

But they say political correctness that has resulted in classic TV shows being “cancelled” and comedians being criticised for past material has made them think again.

Ian admits: “We’re censoring ourselves all the time when we write now and thinking about things differently.

“I have found myself looking through a script Dick and I have been working on and having to say: ‘Wait a minute, where’s the diversity in this script?’

“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 recent *Porridge* reboot,

starring Kevin Bishop, that involved the mention of slavery.

“I 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 (west London) 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.”

The writers, both 83 and living in Los Angeles, were also shocked about UKTV’s decision – since overturned – to remove the famous *Germans* episode of *Fawlty Towers* from its streaming service. Dick says: “I just couldn’t believe it. It did drive me a bit crazy when I heard.”

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 to Shameless - it's all about class."

The BBC's new director general Tim Davie admits there is too much left-wing comedy on the network and there have been calls to have more right-wing viewpoints.

It is 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!"

"But people like him were expressing a blue collar, right-wing viewpoint, which was very valuable."

Seduce

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*.

The duo's entertaining memoir, *More Than Likely*, is published today in paperback and provides an extraordinary, anecdote-packed sweep through their remarkable career.

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. "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 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."

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



AXED LINES: Kevin Bishop in *Porridge*



ALTERNATIVE: Auf Wiedersehen, Pet