

"GEE, SARGE!"Chris Diamond on The Phil Silvers Show

Received wisdom has it that situation comedy is a dying art form. When reviewers and hacks take the subject of television sitcoms under consideration they tend to look well back and cite the likes of *Steptoe and Son*, *Rising Damp*, *Dad's Army* and most particularly *Fawlty Towers* as examples of how good these shows used to be and contrast them with how bad they are now. However, what they never seem to do is look back far enough and see that before any of the above programmes were twinkles in the comedy milkman's eye the form had already been perfected by two men who between them defined precisely what a situation comedy is and should always be.

The Phil Silvers Show began with the title *You'll Never Get Rich: The Phil Silvers Show* and was the brainchild of its creator and producer Nat Hiken. Hiken had already scored two hits as a writer with firstly the great Fred Allen and then with the man credited as the progenitor of popular entertainment on American (and therefore global) television, the phenomenally influential Milton Berle.

Berle's show on NBC made him the biggest star on the American small screen and the proud father of the comedy variety tradition on US television. *The Texaco Four Star Theatre* – later to be *The Milton Berle Show* – made Tuesday nights at 8pm the time when so great a percentage of the American viewing public were looking in that those who weren't didn't figure in anyone's reckoning. In fact, neither Hiken nor Berle brought the show to the screen at its outset. Berle began on the show as merely a guest host who appeared on a rotational basis alongside other more established stars such as Jimmy Durante. Hiken joined up as the writer of that segment of the programme which had been given over to comedienne Martha Raye. But it was when Berle was handed the show that it took off to scale the giddy heights it was to attain. Hiken became one of its principal contributors and not a little part of the reason for that success.

Past Hiken exploits had also included a 10 minute short with the irresistible title *Cliff Edwards and his Buckaroos* and he had long been touting a sitcom script that went under the title *The Magnificent Montague*. Short sighted executives (are there any other kind?) had dismissed this out of hand repeatedly though as being "too smart for the room" and it was never taken up. Of course it was this literacy and sophistication that was to be the secret of the success of Hiken's most famous creation.

Meanwhile, our other hero Phil Silvers had for years been a successful vaudeville, Broadway and film star and had appeared in his own comedy and variety showcase *The Arrow Comedy Theatre*, later *The Phil Silvers Arrow Show*, in 1948. Not a huge success he returned to the stage and his natural habitat of vaudeville. By no means the king of comedy he was however a popular and well liked comedian and certainly a star in his own right. But he had to wait a further seven years for Nat Hiken to make him the star of what was to become the greatest achievement of both men.

In 1954 the cast of what has become generically known as "Bilko" were assembled and filmed an audition episode which introduced the principal characters of the show. However, this was never transmitted and it was to be on Tuesday 20 September 1955 that *You'll Never Get Rich: The Phil Silvers Show* was broadcast by CBS at 8pm and Sergeant Ernest Bilko was first seen by the American public. One can't help but think that CBS had little hope for the programme since it was pitched against Milton Berle and his aforementioned variety behemoth over on NBC in precisely the same slot. But it was to be testament to Hiken and Silver's talent that not only did *Bilko* succeed to attract a huge audience but that it also finished Berle's run as the "King of Television" and adopted the mantle of the midweek must-see show almost immediately upon its appearance.

Soon the title was redrawn so that it became simply *The Phil Silvers Show* and Hiken was hailed as the first television auteur since he not only served as principal writer but also producer and director. For the next three years *The Phil Silvers Show* was to be the most popular show on American television and set itself up as the standard for situation comedy for the next 50 years.

For those with an interest in such things it is interesting then to try and divine what it was that made this show such an overwhelming and (which is almost more important) lasting success.

Firstly we must consider the era which produced the show and the therefore the audience that was watching and how

they reacted to it. Of course they reacted to it spectacularly well, but the question remains: why? 1955 was the America of Eisenhower: confident, rich, successful, powerful, triumphant. The nation was lead by the man who had brought down Hitler and the peace and prosperity which followed World War II was carrying Ike high on its shoulders. What better character could there be then than one of Ike's boys? A soldier. This cannot be stressed enough. With the country in love with it's armed forces still – Korea was yet to happen and Vietnam was still coloured for France on the map – already there was a built-in sympathy for the character and his cohorts. Regardless of what schemes Bilko got up to, no matter what he tried to pull, he was still there serving his country, still in uniform, still one of "our boys". No problems such as class distinction could arise. These were not workers in a factory, poorly paid and exploited by their boss. Nor was Bilko a capitalist outsmarting his employees and growing rich off their labour. All of these problems were circumvented by setting the series in the one place where such thing are not a consideration: the army. Even better this was the US army, so no Sandhurst fops here direct from Winchester or Harrow. The setting was classless and this freed Bilko from any of the background noises of class consciousness.

Secondly there came the platoon. The hierarchy was simple. At the top was Bilko. Then came Barbella and Henshaw the corporals but they exercised no power whatsoever. The only distinction between them and the others seems to be that they were never on the receiving end of their Sergeant's schemes and were his only confidantes. The rest of the platoon were his pigeons though: his source of income as well as the purpose of his employment. Here we had the regular gang: Paparelli, Fender, Zimmerman and, of course, Duane Doberman. It is certainly true that the Sergeant fleeced these poor saps at every turn running card games, bingo competitions, taking bets and so forth to part them from their money. But again this apparent cruelty was excused due to the certain fact that Bilko would have done anything, anything, for his men. Regardless of what or who was involved Bilko would never see any of them conned or cheated by anybody anywhere. That, after all, was his job. They were his men and if anyone was going to take them, it was going to be him and only him. This bond of loyalty is one of the main features of the show and was to remain its backbone for its entire run.

Besides the platoon and its personnel there were very few characters of note but they were extremely important in their way. These were Bilko's colleagues Sergeant's Grover and Ritzig. Mercilessly and endlessly done over by Bilko this was only permitted for the simple reason that the two of them were monumentally stupid and therefore deserved it. However, once again if they were taken by someone else, some interloper – usually a real estate agent – then once again Bilko would swing into action and make sure that the swinish agent bought back that worthless roadside diner for a fortune and his two pigeons would be once more ensconced within the womb of Fort Baxter, Roseville Kansas. That of course leaves only the character I have long seen as the second banana to Ernie and the man who validated Bilko as a character and thereby provided the linchpin for the whole show for both the contemporary viewing public and for the audience ever since: the superb Paul Ford as Colonel John T Hall, Bilko's CO at Fort Baxter.

Col Hall did not appear in every episode of *Bilko* – not in person at any rate although his name would often be invoked by the wary corporals or Ritzig and Grover – but an episode without Col Hall is only ever half an episode. Whereas the show could have survived easily without the likes of Grover, Henshaw, Paparelli or even Doberman – regardless of what the obdurate and self-important Maurice Gosfield who played the diminutive character at the time may have thought – *The Phil Silvers Show* could never have succeeded without the hugely able and sympathetic character created for it by Paul Ford. All, absolutely all, of the success of the show depended on the relationship between Hall and Bilko and had that been different in any way things may not have gone quite so well by any means.

Had Hall been a stronger character, for instance, Bilko's japes might have seemed rather more like subversion than anything else and engendered less trust from the audience. Had Hall been completely stupid and ineffectual then Bilko would seemed heartless in taking advantage of such a sad figure. As it is Ford pitched the character just perfectly and Silvers was able to react sublimely to his performance. If the Colonel gave in to Bilko's schemes too easily then Bilko knew something was wrong and tried to address it on his behalf. If Hall decided to clamp down on Bilko's activities then the Sergeant would react by trying to get around the restrictions but always acknowledging that his Colonel was in charge and that he would be fairly punished if caught. Most importantly, just as the platoon were Bilko's men, the Colonel was Bilko's CO and again, he would never permit anything to be done to him that he felt was unfair or unjust.

In a perfect illustration of the relation ship between the two characters in the episode "The Colonel's Promotion" (series 4, episode 128) Colonel Hall expects a promotion to general but is turned down meaning that when he reunites with his former classmates he will be embarrassed as the underachiever of the group. At this point Bilko appears to try and con a furlough from him but the dejected and vulnerable Colonel hands it over without protest saying he can have whatever he wants. The crucial point here is that in the normal run of things a character like Bilko would take advantage of this and have the Colonel hand over all sorts of privileges and passes. Instead Bilko is concerned that something has gone wrong for his CO and when he uncovers what he resolves to help. He also decides that something must be done to help Mrs Hall who is upset that at the reunion she will seem plain and dowdy as she cannot afford the latest fashions.

In an effort to aid her husband Mrs Hall asks Bilko to accompany them to Washington for the meeting, which Bilko does. He then overhears the others from Hall's class decrying the Colonel as an idiot, the class loser. In a moment that defines the entire series, from start to finish, Bilko is incensed that these big shots should be putting down his Colonel who he knows is a good and honest, hard working man. On the spot he decides that this has to stop. Then we, the audience, are drawn in as we agree and want to know, desperately, how it is to be done. By the end of the show the at first apprehensive Col and Mrs Hall are being feted by his former classmates. They have been convinced that the post as CO of a backwater camp is merely a cover for ultra-secret work on national security and Mrs Hall is the centre of attention as the snobbish women have been persuaded – easily, in their arrogance – that she is wearing the latest "plain chic" from Paris. Bilko retires from the scene a happy man. The Colonel and his wife are in clover and that is good enough for him and we the audience love Bilko even more for doing it and admire him for being able to achieve it. The cleverness, the sophistication and the subtlety involved are quite breathtaking in both the writing and the performance of a piece that could be the highest of plays.

All through the four series are similar examples: the rich girl's mother who mocks Doberman and is fed humble pie for her arrogance by Bilko ("His Highness, Doberman" – series 2, episode 71); the card sharks who con Doberman out of his \$500 inheritance and are cleaned out by the avenging Ernie for their trouble ("The Con Men" – series 1, episode 33); the old buddy of Bilko's who is being held down in his firm by unscrupulous bosses who, by the end of the episode, are bidding against each other for his services thanks to Bilko ("Bilko on Wall St" – series 2, episode 35); the platoon member who is conned out of a fortune by relatives is handed the lot for an old parrot once Bilko intervenes ... well, almost ("Where's There's a Will" – series 2, episode 46).

Time and again Bilko is shown dispensing natural justice for those who are taken advantage of by others. In this way the liberties he takes with these same people are excused and the character is never allowed to be tainted by his own smarts. Similarly there are episodes where he comes a cropper; where his schemes backfire and he is left bereft. But these are merely a lead to a payoff, an excuse for a punchline. The audience is never in any doubt that Bilko is the smarter, cleverer, subtler character. If he is brought down it is usually by dint of getting too clever for his own good and in such circumstances it is nearly always done by the one character who is permitted to outwit him: Colonel Hall.

What all of this builds toward is the picture of Bilko as not only a sympathetic character that people find likeable and attractive. The American public of the time loved Bilko because he was the quintessential American. He worked – regardless of whatever else the platoon got up to we were forever assured that their work in the motor pool at Fort Baxter was extremely good – he was an ordinary guy with no airs and graces, he wasn't particularly handsome but most important he was smart. He was in his job because he wanted to be (in the episode "Reunion" – series 1, episode 15 – Bilko is offered the chance to run a large trucking company but turns it down as he decides he enjoys his army life too much) but he was cleverer than everyone else. As before the only person who could outsmart Bilko was himself. He was the perfect citizen of the great meritocracy. No one was any better than him and no one was any clever than him. Class meant nothing to him and society stopped at the camp gates. This is what audiences in America responded to and came to love.

The Phil Silvers Show personified America at the time. Col Hall was authority, to be outsmarted in accordance with the best American revolutionary traditions. The platoon were the masses, to be looked after and watched over but not coddled. Bilko was the great individual, the US citizen succeeding because he had brains but there for his country when it needed him and fiercely loyal to his fellow citizens when it was required of him. A country contented with itself recognized itself and liked what it saw.

Just as interesting was the format of the programme. Some time ago I was in conversation with a television producer acquaintance of mine when I remarked upon the remarkable success of *Columbo*. I remarked that I thought it unusual that a show of such intricate plotting and an hour or so in length could have been such a success in the US. He responding by telling of the craftiness of the show's structure. In *Columbo*, the audience is shown at the very outset who the murderer is and how they accomplished their crime so the only man in the dark is the crumpled lieutenant himself. What the audience is waiting for is the dénouement when *Columbo* confronts the murderer with the piece of evidence that brings him, or her, to justice. What that means, he told me, is that in the meantime the audience could wander off and watch something else, make dinner, talk on the phone or whatever, safe in the knowledge that they could come back and see the climax knowing that all they had missed was Louis Jourdan, Patrick Magoohan, Mickey Spillane or whoever getting the needle from Peter Falk. An inspired stratagem, we agreed.

The Phil Silvers Show followed much the same template as the show falls into a set pattern. Firstly the scene is set as something either happens to a man on the camp – in the platoon or perhaps the Colonel himself – and then Bilko decides something has to be done. From that point we know full well that Bilko will achieve what he sets out to do. What we want to know is not if, but how: how will Bilko do it. All doubts as to the chances of accomplishment are dispelled because Bilko never fails. Once that is set aside then we can settle in to enjoy the plotting, sometimes incredibly intricately and ingeniously constructed, and appreciate the performances and the superb writing. A method

equally inspired, hugely successful and incredibly enduring.

For three seasons Ernie Bilko reigned supreme on US television. In 1955 the show gained Emmys for Hiken in direction, writing and production and got Silvers the gong for acting. In '56 Emmys came for Best Series, Best Writing and again in '57 the same awards. By the time the last season was aired in 1957/58 though, things were changing. The decline came with the change of the location for the show to Camp Freemont in California, a device introduced in order that excuses could be found to bring in stars such as Bing Crosby for guest episodes. By this time Hiken had also jumped ship and begun development on other projects. Writing was handed over to the young Neil Simon – amongst others – who had been successful providing material for another titan of American comedy, Sid Caesar. However, though Simon developed over the years into one of the world's great comedy writers, at this time he found it hard to change the style of his writing away from what he had been providing for Caesar and gave more of the same to Silvers. What this led to was a character far less sympathetic than Hiken's Ernie and one which contradicted much of that described above. He became a little too smart, a little too sneaky, a little too cute and audiences turned away. The episodes are still wonderful comedy on their own merit but viewed against the first three seasons the character was recognizably different and to tinker with such a beloved figure is a recipe for disaster. By 1959 the series was cancelled and *The Phil Silvers Show's* place in the ratings was taken by *The Jack Benny Show*.

In 1963 Silvers had a run at recreating the success of his original smash with the rather unimaginatively titled *The New Phil Silvers Show* which created for its star the character of Harry Grafton, a factory foreman. The setting may have been different but everyone know it was just Bilko in civvies. It lasted one series.

Silvers knew before he started what problems he would encounter from the outset: "I can't fight it," he said. "It's inevitable that I'll be compared with Bilko ... Sure, the role I'll play will be like Bilko. It's a part of me, and if I do say so myself, I play it pretty well."

But the public disagreed and the series is largely forgotten. The reasons for this have much to do with the fact that the public do not like to be taken for granted. They liked *The Phil Silvers Show*, it did not necessarily follow that they would like a "new" version. Apart from anything else the setting of the series in a factory opened the flood gates to the emotions that setting it in the army side-stepped. As an employee viewers could see Grafton as a wise-ass and as work-shy or as a crook.

Silvers concurred and noted in his autobiography in 1973: "*The New Phil Silvers Show* opened on the CBS network 28 September 1963. After a few weeks it was clear that I owned 100% of a sinking ship. Some episodes were as colourful and electric as the best of the *Bilkos*. Still, in television if you don't make your ratings in the first eight weeks, you're doomed. Harry Grafton had a fundamental flaw: The audience was not rooting for him. Bilko was an underdog – Grafton was not. In a small factory, the real underdog is the owner. He's the one who has to cope with union rules and strikes, laziness, absenteeism, defective workmanship, theft, rising taxes and falling sales. This never occurred to us. We received resentful letters from workingmen: 'Why the hell is Grafton horsing around? He's got a good job.' 'If he doesn't shape up, all the guys will be out of work.'"

Not a little to do with it was the choice of name, Grafton sounding too much like the American slang term "graft" meaning corruption. At the base of things though, it just wasn't as funny and that angered the public. The series became merely an unwelcome footnote to the Phil Silvers story.

Silvers himself took the failure of the series very hard.

Hiken moved on after season three had finished and worked up another hit show, *Car 54, Where Are You?* with Joe E Ross and a young actor who had debuted in episode 10 of *Bilko*, "The Eating Contest", Fred Gwynne. He died in 1968 of a heart attack.

Silvers suffered a nervous breakdown in 1972 but returned to performing shortly afterwards. He never managed to shake off Ernie Bilko though and came to view the character as an albatross.

However, *The Phil Silvers Show* is all the testament either men will ever need to reflect their combined genius and the most crystal clear example of a perfect partnership. The show is surely the most repeated, most continually watched comedy ever made and remains funny and true after nearly 50 years. It also stands as the refutation of the lazy journalistic cliché that sitcoms, such as *Fawlty Towers*, should have short runs. John Cleese's greatest moment may have stretched to 12 great episodes but Hiken and Silver's runs rampant with inventive, wondrous comedy across 143 beautiful half-hours.

The great Al Read once observed that in comedy, if you get the character right the rest will follow. Well, in *The Phil*

Silvers Show, Nat Hiken and Phil Silvers got everything right and everything has followed from there.

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