

Review of The Lost Hancock's – Vacant Lot

Birmingham Comedy Festival presents: The Lost Hancock's: Vacant Lot: Saturday 4 November 2017
Light House, Wolverhampton Image credits: (c) Dave Freak 2017

Review by Tom Dommett and Jon Street.

Up to Wolverhampton to see Vacant Lot a Birmingham Comedy Festival production. The venue, Light House, is quite large and yet with a great community feel to it. This was in the Chubb Buildings – a former lock factory.

As we sit expectantly waiting for the show to start, the mood is set with music from the 1950's playing on the PA.

The cast of six, four men and two women sit as if for a radio broadcast. They are accompanied by a keyboard player and saxophonist, plus a man at a computer, who we assume is responsible for the sound effects. The back projection is of an old style radio, a jaunty theme tune starts up and we are away.



L to R: Linda Hargreaves, Mark Earby, Richard Usher, Jimm Rennie, Janice Connolly, James Hurn.

The tone is set early on, when the announcer, played to perfection by Linda Hargreaves, explains that whereas other nearby resorts are crowded in summer and dull in deserted in winter, "Churdley Bay is dull and deserted all year round".

The first scene is set in a Doctors surgery, discussing the local elections, the choice being between the Reform Party and the Progressive Party – which are both offering the same three policies just in a different order. Hancock is standing for the Progressive Party in a ward that the Reform Party have won with large majorities for years.

Our introduction to Tony Hancock is as he runs an auction, starting the bidding at £5, it tumbles to £4 10 shillings, £4, £3, £1 and eventually accepting a bid of 10 bob. (10 shillings or 50p for younger readers)

Hancock's office boy asks if the winning bid was made by the gentleman with the big conk. [Nose] Hancock admonishes him "how many times must I have to tell you not to speak disrespectful of our clients" before pointing out that "in any case, it's not that one, it's the gentlemen next to the bloke with the big conk".

Hancock sells another item, a clock which the owner of the Hotel where Hancock held the auction explains has just been brought for the sale room and wasn't meant to be sold. Hancock is charged with getting it back.

The purchaser of the clock was an American Sargent from Los Angeles, California, fortunately he is staying nearby. Hancock visits him and tries to bamboozle him that there is something wrong with the clock. The American knows all about clocks, it's his hobby, so Hancock tells him the truth. The American laughs and then admits he has given the clock as a present to his prospective father in law to sweeten him up. The father in law would be Mr Tripfield, leader of the Progressive Party. Hancock already worried word of the clock fiasco will ruin his election chances now has to face his party leader.



Mark Earby (left) and James Hurn

There were some great sound effects of Hancock's battered old car starting and being driven.

Hancock gets the clock off Tripfield and is carrying it back under his coat to protect it from the rain. When challenged on this he claims it is his laundry, upon which the clock starts to chime, eliciting the response "Unless I am very much mistaken Mr Hancock, your laundry is ten minutes fast."



Janice Connolly

Hancock gets the clock back only for his Auntie to think he's brought it for her birthday, she always wanted a clock, even though she has various clocks dotted about the house. Hancock explains she can't have this clock and that he has an even better clock as a birthday present back at the auction room. She is delighted, "I thought you were going to buy me a cheap little present" Hancock's aside "So did I"

It's all been a bit of a nightmare, as the sound effects of clock chimes rise to a crescendo, Hancock is left shouting, "Clocks! Clocks! Clocks!"

The episode ends with the news that Hancock has been elected to the Council by a single vote. Apparently, American officers led by the clock purchaser, lent their cars to convey Reform party voters to the polling station. The Sergeant, having wanted to help Hancock out, has deliberately arranged for this opponents supporters to be taken not to the polling station but to a remote pub so they end up not voting

Episode two

The newly appointed Mayor is looking to appoint someone dynamic to the entertainments committee. The current membership has done nothing, so much so that the Mayor hadn't even noticed the chairman is dead.



Linda Hargreaves

They consider the candidates. “Who got up in the town Hall and made a brilliant speech for the Reform Party? Hancock.” What’s wrong with that? “He happened to be standing for the Progressive Party”

The Mayor appoints Hancock and explains he has booked space for an advert in the Daily News to promote Churdley Bay and that Hancock has to get the copy off on the six o’clock train.

The Mayors’ draft for the advert describes a wonderful resort, so much so that another character remarks “It sounds a wonderful place Mr Hancock, where is it?”

Hancock for his own amusement had drawn up another advert Churdley Bay as it really is, along the lines of:

Come to Churdley Bay, resort of bankrupts and international unknowns. Sunbathe on the golden slopes of the corporation slag heaps or doze lazing in the shadow of the Accrington Road gasworks. Lacerate your feet on the sharpened stones on the beach. Bathe in the calm waters of our famous Cabbage Lane static water tank. And all this misery for only twice what you’d pay anywhere else. Yes, yes, forget Palm Beach Florida where the turf meets the surf, choose Churdley Bay, where the drains meet the sea.

Well you can guess what’s coming, the office boy, Lemon takes the wrong wording and there follows a chase round



James Hurn as Hancock – Come to Churdley Bay

town as Hancock tries to intercept Lemon and correct the mistake. Hancock remains one step behind. There are very Galton and Simpson like jokes about the Police and a funny sequence where he's on the phone in a desperate attempt to stave off disaster. He even tries to ring London and contact the newspaper direct, but the lines are down.

The good news is that the advert as drafted by Hancock results in thousands of enquiries about the Town and everyone assumes it was the perfect plan all along. The payoff is they decide to reward Hancock with the gift of an extra-large caraway seed cake. The script has earlier made clear Hancock can't stand caraway seed cake. [Caraway seed cake is perhaps best described as a cake where someone has added bit of savoury tasting grit]

Both the episodes were superbly performed by a very professional cast. James Hurn, I swear becomes more and more like Hancock every time I see him. He really lives the part from body language to facial expressions with superb timing and perfect voice. If you had been told it was a lost Hancock recording, you wouldn't have guessed it was James Hurn and not the lad himself.

The shows were a revelation, they had lots of characters, lots of plot and lots of sound effects. Despite being written 65 years ago, they remained very fresh and funny. It was a surprise to hear what were clearly sitcoms from a time before sitcoms. The audience was left wanting to know more about the going on of the Churdley Bay. Sadly, it seems these were the only two episodes written. Episode 1 ran to 41 mins and episode 2 to 36 mins

Vacant Lot clearly had potential to run to many more episodes. Hancock had been set up with the ability to dip in or out of any activity in the town and/or use the auction rooms to spark off comic adventures. THAS rating 5 stars !



The Lost Hancocks: Vacant Lot project team Left to right: Linda Hargreaves (Narrator, Miss Bogman, various) Dave Stokes (sax) Janice Connolly (Mrs Tripfield, Helen Locke, various) Nick Wiltshire (keyboards, musical director) Julie Warren (Larry Stephens' biographer and cousin) Dave Freak (producer, director, designer) Richard Usher (Ambrose Tripfield, Pemble, various) Jimm Rennie (Dr Quince, Lemon, various) Mark Earby (Madkin, Sgt Glass, various) James Hurn (Tony Hancock)

The Question and Answer Session

Featured the producer, three of the cast: James Hurn, Janice Connolly, Richard Usher and Larry Stephens biographer and cousin, Julie Warren.

Julie explained that Vacant Lot was written in 1952, around the time Hancock was doing the Royal Variety performance, Educating Archie and Variety Bandbox. Hancock was a household name but not a huge star.

A couple of biographies briefly mention a lost sitcom "Welcome to Welkham" as being written for Hancock. Julie found that in the BBC archives but it didn't seem to relate to Hancock, but the files contained several references to "Vacant Lot". Julie asked the archivist if they could find Vacant Lot and they did.

This was a fascinating discovery. The Show had been taken seriously by a BBC producer, scripts had been written, auditions held, there was even a letter from Charles Hawtrey thanking the BBC for an audition, even though he wasn't cast. Parts had been earmarked for Peter Sellers, Kenneth Connor and Spike Milligan.

The files about the show contains the earliest known reference by the BBC to "situation comedy" and it would have been made with no musical interludes, not sketches but one continuous story line. It rather than Hancock's Half Hour could have been forever, the father/mother of British Sitcom.

So what happened? It seems that Hancock got caught up in a debate about whether the programme should be recorded in front of a live audience or not. The discussion went around in circles, and decisions were reached then unreachd.

In the end, events moved on, people become involved in other projects and Vacant Lot was dropped. Welcome to Welkham was written later in the year at short notice by Larry Stephens as a one off play to fill a gap in the schedules and not surprisingly like many writers, he raided an unused previous idea (ie Vacant Lot) for setting and characters.

James Hurn noted how when first reading the Vacant Lots scripts he could hear Hancock. He also noted how the script was very visual and could have made on Television. James also said he thought Hancock had been very wise in surrounding himself with other talented cast members. He knew he was good, but he got the best support. Vacant Lot with Peter Sellers, Kenneth Connor and Spike Miligan would have been the same.

Janice noted that there were several strong female characters who had been given long scenes. Which was extremely unusual even years later. Another ground-breaking innovation.

Richard said that the scripts had both the sitcom style plus elements of Goon show silliness, especially silly word play. Lots of lovely character actor roles pop up. All the classic sitcom elements were there – mistaken identity, mislaid things etc.

The Punch and Judy Man

This was a rare chance to see the film on the Big Screen. Having seen it many time on DVD, I was curious to see what it was like in the cinema, as originally intended. I think everyone comment I have read on the topic says it works better on the small screen. The sense that I got was that the big screen format was not really utilised in the film. It's not a spectacular block buster or action adventure. I wouldn't say it works better on small screen so much as being on the big screen doesn't add anything. I suppose that the big screen does emphasise how less mobile Tony's features had become.

My overwhelming impression at the end of the film was about how mystified the audience would have been. They would have been expecting the Hancock of the Blood Donor and Radio Ham, the film was marketed as 'Hancock rebels again' linking it to his last film 'The Rebel', to which it bares no resemblance. Some people describe it as a melancholy comedy, but as George Fairweather asked "Where are the funnies" - where are the jokes? The ice-cream parlour scene divides people. Some think it one of the funniest bits of the film, other thing that it goes on too long. Personally, I think it's a great idea that doesn't quite come off. I like the realism of the film, it most closely resembles a kitchen sink drama for the same era, some of the scenes with the young boy (Nicholas Webb) and with Sylvia Sims are truly touching and emotional in a straight acting way.

It struck me that the last scene was very much based on Hancock's own experience of performing cabaret to an indifference and then hostile audience of Conservatives while the general election results came in. Unfortunately, the food fight lacks the tit for tat build-up of a classic Laurel and Hardy routine but goes from 0-60 in 20 seconds.

Philip Oakes who wrote the film with Tony was always went out of his way to give Tony credit for scenes and ideas, but at the same time, it was clear the Philip did the typing and wrote most if not all of the lines.

Tom's Reflection

It was certainly worth the journey to see the smashing performance. The obvious question is if Vacant Lot have been made would we have had Hancock's Half Hour? I think it could have gone either way. Vacant Lot clearly had potential to run at least to the suggested initial six episodes. Many of the features of HHH are there in Vacant Lot. Its success could have led to HHH or meant HHH was never made. It is interesting to note the sleeve notes accompanying Hancock Collectibles volume one suggests that Tony turned to Ray Galton and Alan Simpson as writers because Larry Stephens had been come so involved in the Goon Show. What is clear is that Larry Stephens very much got Tony Hancock's sense of humour both in life and as a performer and must take substantial credit for planting the idea of a radio comedy based on character not one-liners, stories not sketches and without musical breaks.

If you want to see a script of the show and find out more about Larry Stephens and Tony Hancock, and so much more, pledge your support to Glarnies, Green Berets & Goons: The Life and Legacy of Larry Stephens, at unbound.com <https://unbound.com/books/goons>

The cast are keen to perform the show again, so pester your local arts venue suggesting they make a booking.

Jon's thoughts:

The presentation of the two episodes was very professional. James Hurn as Tony Hancock had the right cadence and delivery to pull off a very convincing performance. Having not seen him perform live before and being more impressed by his depiction of Sid James on youtube, I was unsure if I thought his Hancock impression was of the same calibre, however I was highly impressed by his performance, which was spot on and I imagine it's not an easy performance to keep up for the length of an entire radio show, so Bravo to him!

The supporting cast were of an equally high standard, particularly praiseworthy were Janice Connolly and Richard Usher, who both performed their varied parts with a real zest and enthusiasm.

The whole performance was more of an ensemble piece than I had expected, and to my surprise it was quite a few minutes before Hancock's character has his first lines. The cast (Barring James Hurn) all had at least three characters each to play and all performed admirably in distinguishing their different characters from each other.

It's easy to imagine Peter Sellers playing Dr Quince, who's laconic and sarcastic lines would have perfectly fit the Goon show character of Hercules Grytpype-Thynne, similarly the character of Pemble one could imagine as being performed almost like a less exaggerated version of Henry Crun.

All in all, both the scripts were fantastically written and performed and not at all dated for something written in 1952. If only Larry Stephens had written a couple more.

ENDS