

Successful failures, happy losers, total losers: Tony Hancock, Lenny Bruce (Norman Wisdom)

We've already seen something of Tony Hancock, the comedian who sits at the front of this website looking a bit fed up. What connects him to Lenny Bruce is not only that both men died tragically, (Hancock committed suicide, Lenny Bruce may have intended suicide, but may simply have died as a result of a heroin overdose). There were artistic similarities too. They were both extremely accomplished comic actors, with an exquisite sense of timing. When Hancock's alcoholism took over, his timing and his reactions began to go. He lost the ability to reflect and build on the comedy of the situation as fast as the audience. When Lenny Bruce became too strung out on heroin, he spent more and more of his onstage time explaining the rights and wrongs of the numerous court actions against him, and he just wasn't funny anymore.

When a comedian stops being funny, especially when he has been funny, not just wildly funny but and hugely, successfully funny, as both Hancock and Lenny Bruce were, they know that it's time to leave the stage. But it's very difficult if the stage is all you have in your life, and the only good relationships you have known have been with your audience, who have loved you more than your wife, certainly more than your agent or your fellow comedians, who can't wait to see you fall.

As for Norman Wisdom, he was never funny. He's only here this week to give you some idea of the meaning of 'average' when it comes to comedy. Norman Wisdom was an average comedian, and if we look at him and then at Hancock and Lenny Bruce, in their prime, we can get a better idea of how unusual they were and why their lives were such tragedies. Norman Wisdom at his prime was about as good as Hancock and Lenny Bruce just before they died. (And yet Norman Wisdom was extremely popular and lived a long successful life).

Anthony [Tony] John Hancock (12 May 1924 – 24 June 1968) was a British comedian, born in Birmingham, in middle England and brought up from the age of three in Bournemouth, on the south coast England, by his mother and his father, Roger, who worked as a comedian and entertainer, not very successfully, and died when Hancock was 10 years old, and then by his stepfather, who ran a series of hotels.

During the last war, Hancock worked in the armed forces entertainment group, entertaining the troops. After the war he had some success on BBC Radio, then as a stand-up comedian at the Windmill Theatre, where the audience consisted mainly of men who had come to see the strippers. Surely anyone who could make these people laugh could make anyone laugh.

Hancock worked in BBC Radio comedy and then on TV in its earliest days, on the series *Hancock's Half-Hour*.



The people who mattered in his professional career were Sid James, his working partner and to some extent straight man in Hancock's Half Hour, his radio and TV semi-girlfriend, Hattie Jaques, and most important of all, the *Hancock's Half-Hour* scriptwriters, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson. Initially Hancock

worked with a group of comic actors including Jaques and James, and Kenneth Williams, but for his most memorable TV broadcasts, which went out in 1961, he worked alone.

Here's a continuation of The Missing Page, which we saw last week:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5WIBZBSbAQ>

Influence

Here's a once fashionable Hancock fan, singing 'Lady Don't Fall Backwards',

Pete Doherty: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn6K_xazIpw

1. **The Bedsit** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLZVGRH3BGo>

The lonely loser demonstrating smoke rings and how to climb up your own feet (bored out of his skull): **[From beginning to 2:20]**

2. & the TV routine: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLZVGRH3BGo>

[From 1:37 - 4:01]

3. And Rowan Atkinson, borrowing and maybe improving on the routine:

[Beginning to end - 5" 42' if time allows]

Hancock really does beg questions about comedy and success, and the value of fame. All in all, he was a highly successful loser, funny but 44 is far too dead far too young: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtLmkWNoyBE>

Lenny Bruce was a New Yorker, Jewish, a skinny, runty man with oversized eyes and a big mouth. He came from a long tradition of East Coast Jewish humour but he broke free of that, broke free of the quick slightly bitter jokey patter style and moved into vivid, hilarious free association that was sometimes hilarious, often failed completely, and sometimes came near to getting him killed.

Even at his best, Lenny had a tendency to preach, to tell his audiences what was right and what was wrong. He had a profound, immovable hatred of deceit, in a society that seemed to him to be founded on lies, hidden motives, secrets and prejudice.

One of his main lines of argument was that the American people, and most people in consumer-driven societies, were being fooled. He didn't see it as a conspiracy. He saw it as an addiction to a bright future, a happy ending, a mindless, unrealistic narrative. His view of it all was much bleaker.

When John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in November 1963, his wife, Jacqueline, first cradled his shattered head in her arms, and then climbed out of her seat and crawled over the body of the car to safety. The US news media put a heroic interpretation on her actions – that she was going for help. But Lenny Bruce was outraged by this. He said that this wasn't what we should be telling our children, putting a noble mask on a normal human reaction to extreme, horrific danger: Jacqueline was getting out of there. Lenny's view was bleak, ignoble, but much more believable.

Here is Dustin Hoffman as Lenny Bruce in the Biopic 'Lenny' [trailer is here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcJRrbwGdWo>] working up what is called a shtick in Jewish humour – a routine built around a single idea, in this case that there is 'What Should Be', as the TV and the media want us to believe it, the world of the TV commercial, and then there is 'What Is', and that's what we all have to deal with, whether we like it or not (some people say 'It is what it is' in the US, but that is a kind of sad acceptance of hard reality): Lenny Bruce doesn't say we should accept it, but he does say we should never embrace 'What Should Be': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiBy3wAEO8>

Dustin Hoffman is pretty good, and there isn't much really good clear Lenny Bruce material recorded or filmed because he really was one of those comics who was best live, real, and spontaneous. You had to be there. But here's one where Lenny Bruce really puts himself on the line, using the dreaded N-word:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfNhiRGQ-js>

And here's what he says, more or less:

“By the way are there any niggers here tonight? Could you turn on the house lights, please, and could the waiters and waitresses just stop serving, just for a second? And turn off this spot. Now what did he say? “Are there any niggers here tonight?” I know there's one nigger, because I see him back there working. Let's see, there's two niggers. And between those two niggers sits a kike. And there's another kike – that's two kikes and three niggers. And there's a spic. Right? Hmm? There's another spic. Ooh, there's a wop; there's a polack; and, oh, a couple of greaseballs. And there's three



lace-curtain Irish micks. And there's one, hip, thick, hunky, funky, boogie. Boogie boogie. Mm-hmm. I got three kikes here, do I hear five kikes? I got five kikes, do I hear six spics, I got six spics, do I hear seven niggers? I got seven niggers. Sold American. I pass with

seven niggers, six spics, five micks, four kikes, three guineas, and one wop. Well, I was just trying to make a point, and that is that it's the suppression of the word that gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness. The point: if President Kennedy would just go on television, and say, “I would like to introduce you to all the niggers in my cabinet,” and if he'd just say “nigger nigger nigger nigger nigger” to every nigger he saw, “boogie boogie boogie boogie boogie,” “nigger nigger nigger nigger nigger” ‘til nigger didn't mean didn't mean anything anymore, then you could never make some six-year-old black kid cry because somebody called him a nigger at school.”

The point about the distinction between What Is / What Should Be is that it still applies, and not just in the United States. It's most important in wartime, especially when the enemy start fighting back and things don't go according to plan and young people start getting killed and then the bodies start coming back. In Lenny Bruce's own time there was a ban on the media giving statistics on the number of American soldiers being killed in the Vietnam war (the

number of body bags) because that didn't fit the happy ending narrative. In the Iraq war there was a ban on news media showing the coffins coming back – again, the government and the media wanted a different ending.

Derek and Clive, whom we discussed last week, had a very short dialogue where they did much the same thing with another word we try not to use, because it's offensive, it's a death-word, it's called the C-word – **CANCER**:
[SOUND TRACK ON PHONE]

CLIVE: I heard that, er, George Stit had, er, moved away from, er, the, er, the Willesden area and, er, gone up, er, round Chadwell Heath.

DEREK: Cancer?

CLIVE: Yeah.

DEREK: Tch..... Oh my..... Er, it's funny you should say that 'cause you remember Enid? Who used to, erm, live across the road at number 104.

CLIVE: Yeah, just next to 105.

DEREK: Right.

CLIVE: Mmm.

DEREK: Er, she's now working at the United Dairies down Green Lane.

CLIVE: What, cancer?

DEREK: Yeah.

CLIVE: Tch, Christ. You remember the Nolan twins?

DEREK: Ohhh, yeah....

CLIVE: Fifi? Fifi Nolan...?

DEREK: Right.

CLIVE... and.....

DEREK: And - and Ronnie.

CLIVE: And Ronnie Nolan, mmm.

DEREK: Yeah.

CLIVE: They've taken up darts.

DEREK: Cancer?

CLIVE: Yep.

DEREK: Tch.

You can see that this routine could go absolutely anywhere. They could take any situation and run with it, and leave a silence, and then ask “Cancer?”

It’s another take on the idea that a word is meaningless, once you put it in a new context, or repeat it endlessly, or just use it, as Lenny Bruce did.

Peter Cook was a huge admirer of Lenny Bruce, and he invited him over to London, where Lenny gave his only British performance, at a club called The Establishment, with numerous law enforcement specialists in the audience.

As for the brilliant Norman Wisdom. Here he is singing in the bath:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CWMkE5e8a0>