

The return of classic comedy

Six of our all-time favourite comedies are returning to the small screen. Mike Ward reflects

on the appeal of the originals and reveals what's in store for their characters now...

TILL DEATH US DO PART

Lifespan: 1965-75 (64 episodes)
Stars included: Warren Mitchell, Dandy Nichols, Anthony Booth and Ewa Strass



THEN



NOW

What was it about?
Alf Garnett was a rabidly opinionated, working-class East Ender, forever ranting about the state of the country, particularly under Harold Wilson's Labour. His blistering bigotry sparked no end of battles with his daughter Rita, left-wing son-in-law Mike (AKA the Scouse gog) and long-suffering wife Else, repeatedly dismissed as a "silly old moo".

Why did we love it?
Admittedly, some came to love the dreadful Alf for the wrong reasons, but most viewers realised the show was a hilarious put-down of the character's blind prejudices.

And now?
Recreating one of writer Johnny Speight's scripts *A Woman's Place Is In The Home* as part of BBC4's *Lost Sitcoms* are Simon Day (as Alf), Lizzie Roper (Else), Sydney Rae White (Rita) and Carl Au (Mike).

PORRIDGE

Lifespan: 1974-77 (21 episodes)
Stars included: Ronnie Barker, Richard Beckinsale, Felton Mackay and Brian Wilde



THEN



NOW

What was it about?
Shade Prison had become almost a home from home for seasoned criminal Norman Stanley Fletcher (Ronnie Barker). This lovable rogue took delight in regularly outwitting its officers (stern Scottish disciplinarian Mr Mackay, in particular, and drippy Mr Barrowclough), but also struck up a touchingly paternal relationship with his naive cellmate Lennie.

Why did we love it?
Endearingly world-weary old lag Fletcher had learned how to cope behind bars, amusing himself (and us) with his small but richly satisfying victories over authority figures – and not just the ones in uniform.

And now?
Writers Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais have created a new story for BBC1, where the Fletcher we meet (played by Kevin Bishop) is the original character's grandson, serving time for cyber crime.

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

Lifespan: 1959-95 (44 episodes)
Stars included: Patricia Routledge, Clive Swift, Judy Cornwell and Geoffrey Hughes



THEN



NOW

What was it about?
Hyacinth Bucket (Patricia Routledge) insisted you pronounce her surname "bouquet" – a running gag that told us all we needed to know about this hilarious suburban snob. A monster of a woman, she'd affect ludicrous airs and graces in a desperate bid to hide her working-class roots, to the constant exasperation of her hen-pecked husband Richard.

Why did we love it?
Hyacinth's respectable middle-class persona was so blatantly an act, and rarely convincing. It was such a joy to see the mask slip – which, of course, it did inevitably on a weekly basis.

And now?
Writer Roy Clarke has penned a prequel, *Young Hyacinth*, set in the late 50s and revealing how the character came to be such a dreadful social climber. Kerry Howard plays the title role.

STEPTOE AND SON

Lifespan: 1962-74 (57 episodes)
Stars included: Wilfrid Brambell and Harry H Corbett



THEN



NOW Wednesday September 14, 9pm, BBC4

What was it about?
Albert Steptoe and his son Harold ran an East End rag and bone business. It suited Albert but Harold – a man in his 30s, still living at home with his weaselly skinflint of a father – felt perpetually frustrated, dreaming of a better life that was always beyond reach.

Why did we love it?
It was a beautifully written generation-gap comedy, with would-be social climber Harold forever having the ladder pulled away from him by his needy, manipulative father.

And now?
One of Ray Galton and Alan Simpson's lost episodes will be performed for BBC4. *A Winter's Tale* finds Albert (now played by Jeff Rawle) and Harold (Ed Coleman) bickering over where to go on holiday.

GOODNIGHT SWEETHEART

Lifespan: 1993-99 (58 episodes)
Stars included: Nicholas Lyndhurst, Dervla Kirwan, Elizabeth Carling and Keir McGuire

What was it about?
TV repairman Gary Sparrow (Nicholas Lyndhurst) stumbled upon a time travel portal and found himself back in 1940. There he met and married wartime barmaid Phoebe, a somewhat controversial move as he already had a wife in the present day. For six series, he led an increasingly complex double life, flitting back and forth between the 40s and the 90s.

Why did we love it?
Wartime nostalgia, romance, intrigue, bigamy and a smattering of sci-fi: what's not to like?

And now?
Creators Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran have reunited the cast for a new one-off episode on BBC1. When last we saw Gary, he'd become trapped in the 40s – but it seems that he may have finally found a way home...



Friday, 9pm, BBC1

HANCOCK'S HALF HOUR

Lifespan: 1956-61 (63 episodes)
Stars included: Tony Hancock and Sid James



THEN



NOW

What was it about?
It's common now to find comedians and actors playing exaggerated versions of themselves. But Tony Hancock did it 60 years ago in Galton and Simpson's groundbreaking sitcom. Anthony Aloysius St John Hancock had little to show for his lofty ambitions and heightened sense of his own importance.

Why did we love it?
For all his pomposity, you could sympathise with the Hancock character, forever being knocked back by life's frustrations.

And now?
Kevin McNally will star in Hancock's Half Hour episode *The New Neighbour*, written by Galton and Simpson in 1956 but lost from the archives, as part of BBC4's *Lost Sitcoms*.