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1 The Gentlemen

As BBC2 revved up for its spring season in 1999, it began to show trailers for a comedy series that, hyperbole aside, looked like nothing else on television. Grotesque characters delivered lines not yet classifiable as catchphrases, but already sufficiently insidious to burrow into the unconscious, waiting to be repeated in workplaces and playgrounds. What was less clear was whether it was a sitcom or a sketch show, a question to which the series did not provide a conclusive answer when it was broadcast. *The League of Gentlemen* would often appear to be other things too, not least blackly comic horror. The phrase ‘northern Gothic’ was widely applied to the series, set in a provincial location on the border between town and (bleak) countryside and populated by a gallery of strange characters, some of whom would command enormous affection from audiences. A prim middle-class family obsessed with toads and hygiene subjected their nephew to an impossibly inflexible domestic regime. The restart officer at the unemployment office systematically demoralised the ‘dole scum’ in her care. A sinister butcher supplied a mysterious addictive substance to an elite clientele. A travelling circus arrived in town, presided over by a nightmarish figure with a disturbing interest in other people’s wives. Above all, there was the Local Shop run by a misshapen couple, simultaneously sibling and spouse to one another, prepared to go to extremes to keep the town free of outsiders. Welcome to Royston Vasey.

Critically celebrated at the time, showered with awards, an enduring reference point for innovative British comedy series, *The*

League of Gentlemen has been bafflingly neglected as an object of more sustained analysis. It is the aim of this book to rectify that neglect and to explore this richly fascinating series in greater critical depth. *The League of Gentlemen* was a sketch show that played less and less like a sketch show, until it ceased to be one altogether. Its three lead performers were so versatile and physically mutable that the *Radio Times* provided a chart to help the audience recognise who played who among the huge cast of characters.¹ It was ‘dark’, a word that became almost as umbilically linked to the series as the word ‘Local’; some of this ‘darkness’ derived from the horror genre, some of it from elements of tragedy, cruelty and ‘bad taste’. It was ‘northern’, a more contentious claim than might first appear, although international sales suggest that its representation of the ‘Local’ was translatable to those with no experience of the English north–south divide. It was a cult show, but it spawned a multitude of catchphrases, often a sign of mainstream, audience-uniting aspirations. It made many fan-pleasing references to film and television, while simultaneously appearing unique and original, creating a ‘world’ that its followers felt able to inhabit. It was an awards magnet, at least initially, but alienated and lost some viewers as it tried new things or became even darker. It depicted a grim, ugly town, but raised the bar for the look of British comedy series, with a richness of design detail unprecedented in live-action TV comedy. It was set in a town named after an offensive comedian, who later appeared as its mayor. It (probably) paved the way for *Little Britain* (BBC3/BBC2/BBC1, 2003–), which achieved greater mainstream success but had to endure persistent accusations that it was *League*-lite. Listing the series’ salient features in this way also indicates that it does not lend itself to a single, unified approach. Sketch shows are scattershot in nature, even those with a unified setting like this one, which is possibly a way of gently breaking it to the reader that my approach will be scattershot too. Nevertheless, certain themes and concerns predominate throughout my analysis: the regional identity of the series and its sense of place, its mixing of comedy and horror, its intertextual complexity, its cult status and its willingness to experiment with what was already a relatively

unusual format, sometimes to the detriment of its popularity. I write from what is starting to be seen as a hybrid critical identity, the academic-fan. On the one hand, aspects of the series have resonated with my familiarity with certain types of academic theory. On the other hand, I am a fan of the show, and in discussions of comedy, personal taste has a tendency to elbow its way to the front. In other words, I make little attempt to disguise my investment in convincing the reader that *The League of Gentlemen* is as great as I think it is, but without losing sight of some of the more contentious aspects of the series. Different sections of the book place an emphasis on different critical approaches, some more theoretical, some more evaluative, and with an occasional indulgent excursion into transparent celebration.

Just as we make a distinction between *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (a TV series, BBC2, 1969–74) and Monty Python (a team, a brand name), I shall speak of both *The League of Gentlemen* and the League of Gentlemen (keep an eye on those italics). More often, I shall refer to 'the League' or 'the Gents', as a rough equivalent to the informal 'Python' or 'the Pythons'. The focus of this introductory chapter is particularly on 'the League', both the pre-history of the TV series and how the team appears to have functioned *as* a team. For viewers who first encountered the League of Gentlemen on television, they seemed to have sprung from nowhere fully formed, with no visible connection to existing TV comedy networks, but the basis for the series had been gestating in fringe theatre and then on radio since 1994.

The League of Gentlemen consists of Jeremy Dyson, Mark Gatiss, Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith. The latter three play the vast majority of the characters between them, in addition to writing the series with Dyson, whose onscreen appearances are confined to cameos; look out for him buying cigarette lighters from Les McQueen, playing rhythm guitar with Creme Brulee or heckling Geoff Tipps during his stand-up act. From 1986–9, Gatiss and Pemberton studied Theatre Arts at Bretton Hall, a college of art, music and drama affiliated to (and later merged with) Leeds University; Shearsmith was in the year below. Gatiss plays Royston Vasey's demon butcher Hilary Briss, hapless vet Dr

Chinnery, and Creme Brulee's erstwhile guitarist Les McQueen alongside numerous other roles. Hilary apart, his most characteristic roles are often innocents like Chinnery, Les and hotelier Alvin. 'They're kind of well-meaning, kind-hearted people and life has dealt them a bad hand', he says. 'Les isn't a bitter man at all, but there's a wonderful self-delusion going on and Alvin is the same.'² But Gatiss is arguably at his best in two stand-alone monologues, as a depressed cave guide with a guilty memory and a sinister mortician. As his novels about bisexual spy Lucifer Box and his work on *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–89, BBC1, 2005–) suggest,³ Gatiss has a fondness for period. 'I would say that I have a facility for historical comedy, and a sort of bleakness in my soul which leads me down the path of those sort of semi-tragic characters – that's what I do.'⁴ While *The League of Gentlemen* ostensibly offers few outlets for this, 'The Curse of Karris Poor', the third story in the Christmas Special (2000), has Gatiss all over it. Pemberton collaborated with Gatiss on a number of projects both at Bretton Hall and after: a spoof working men's club act (Fat and Crass), a game-show parody *Damage Your Children*, and a comic play about two hitmen contracted to kill death (*Death Warmed Up*). Pemberton's signature roles are two of the series' most popular characters, Tubbs and Pauline. He brings an energy and warmth to seemingly monstrous characters, but can play more purely terrifying figures like Pop. While the word 'androgynous' does not spring to mind, he is for some reason the most convincing Gent in drag. Pemberton is an extraordinary physical performer. Witness him donning carpet-restoring shoes as Harvey Denton and transforming into some kind of peculiar self-satisfied cyborg crossed with a slow-motion ice-skater. This might be what Henri Bergson had in mind in his influential essay on humour when he equated physical comedy with the human body's resemblance to a machine.⁵ Shearsmith began to collaborate with Pemberton, including a comic play that featured the first appearance of Pauline Campbell-Jones, a character based on Shearsmith's own restart officer during a period of unemployment. His two most popular characters are Edward and Papa Lazarou, but his particular speciality as an actor is impotent rage; the businessman Geoff Tipps and Legz Akimbo Theatre Company's

writer-director Ollie Plimsolls. Shearsmith is most recognisable as Benjamin, but he is also the Gent who most ‘disappears’ into his make-up. It may take a while for first-time viewers to work out that Ross, Geoff, Edward and Papa Lazarou are all played by the same person; when Papa terrorises Bernice at the climax of the Christmas Special, it barely registers that Shearsmith is effectively chasing himself. Dyson is the only member of the League who did not attend Bretton Hall. Instead, he studied Philosophy at Leeds University itself, going on to do a Masters in Screenwriting at the Northern School of Film and Television. He performed in the first shows staged by what would become the League of Gentlemen. In a different kind of sketch show, one might speculate that he might have continued to do so; the Python team, for example, possessed varying levels of acting ability. After the League’s early performances, however, it became apparent that the character-based material required the high-level acting skills that Dyson’s three friends possessed:

The three of them were very strong on stagecraft. They were quite snobby about it, even in those very first shows. They hated things that were shoddy. It all dated back to their time at Bretton because they took a pride in what they did. I was floored by what they did because it would just come naturally to them, it would just flow out of them. All three of them had a genius.⁶

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As the non-actor of the group, Dyson has sometimes seemed vulnerable to being marginalised by critics understandably seduced by the performative aspects of the series, and some of this seems to have been felt by the writer; ‘because I was a non-performer, there was a period where I was self-conscious about that and felt that I had to pedal harder to justify my place in the pecking order’. In Ben Thompson’s book on post-alternative comedy, the chapter on the League is headed ‘Three character actors no longer in search of an author’ and provides a narrative in which the three performers write material to showcase their virtuosity in a way that would not otherwise have been possible if working solely as actors-for-hire. There is doubtless no ill will here, but

it does make it sound as though there are only *three* (significant) Gentlemen, an impression exacerbated by his referring to Dyson as ‘Ringo’.⁷ In any case, Dyson has been assistant producer since series two and is an acclaimed writer in his own right.

Like Monty Python before them, the League members write mainly in pairs. Where Gatiss plays the lead character (Chinnery, Les, Alvin, Hilary, Lance) he generally co-writes with Dyson. Together they also write the hygiene-obsessed Dentons, Judee and Iris, and Pop. Pemberton and Shearsmith are the creators of Tubbs and Edward, Pauline, Geoff Tipps, Papa Lazarou, and Charlie and Stella. Python’s creative partnerships often have authorial quirks attributed to them, John Cleese and Graham Chapman associated with vitriol and cruelty (and dead parrots), Michael Palin and Terry Jones with surreal ‘silliness’ like ‘The Spanish Inquisition’. There are discernible differences between the paired Gents, but they don’t lend themselves to such a schematic opposition. Les, Chinnery and Alvin are gentler characters, but anyone discerning a ‘softer’ side to the Dyson–Gatiss partnership might want to check out Pop, Hilary and Lance before leaping to conclusions. There is an immediacy about Pemberton and Shearsmith’s material that might explain why they created so many of the show’s catchphrases; their ear for the absurdity of overheard phrases or out-of-context film and TV dialogue resonated through the series’ popular reception. ‘They were always reading things out that were so instantaneously funny that it was a joy to listen to’, remembers Gatiss, feeling that his and Dyson’s material didn’t always get the same reaction at read-throughs. ‘I always envied them their fluency and their genius’, says Dyson.

I remember watching them perform ‘Mau Mau’ for the first time in their front room down the road when we were living in Highgate and thinking ‘You bastards!’ Because you just knew it was a classic you were watching. You just knew that that was better than a Python sketch.

Pemberton and Shearsmith often trade in the ‘traps’ of socially realist British comedy. Frustrated joke-teller Geoff and warring couple

Charlie and Stella in particular belong to a tradition that includes Hancock, Harold Steptoe and Basil Fawlty, characters who long for something better, or to *be* something better, but will forever remain confined by a relationship, job or living arrangement, but most cruelly of all, by their own limitations. British sitcom loves its losers, especially those with frustrated aspirations, and the ‘classics’ often develop this to a level that knocks on the door of ‘proper’ drama. Both teams offer characters defined by disappointment, but if Geoff is a bitter, angry character, Les retains a misplaced optimism that dooms him to an eternity of crumpled ambition. He will never rejoin his band Creme Brulee or recapture their also-ran ‘fame’, but he will never be able to let them go. Dyson and Gatiss have a strong narrative sense, as accomplished storytellers in other media, and their humour often seems less gag-based, the ‘Special Stuff’ served by Hilary Briss being a case in point. ‘I suppose, with Jeremy and I, it’s sort of a slower burn’, says Gatiss. Both fans of Alan Bennett, they share his ability to hint at unspoken tragedy and horror, never more so than in their cave guide haunted by the death of a young boy; if ‘Mau Mau’ is (as Dyson claims) ‘better than a Python sketch’, then ‘Stumphole Cavern’ is their ‘Mau Mau’. It’s tempting to suggest that Shearsmith and Pemberton represent the populist side of the League, the road that leads to *Little Britain* and Catherine Tate, while Dyson and Gatiss epitomise its cultishness, but even that is too neat. Chinnery is as simple and populist as could be, while who would have guessed that a character as seemingly obscure as Papa Lazarou would become so iconic? Like Python, the League includes one gay member (Chapman and Gatiss respectively), but it’s interesting that the ‘queerer’ material, like Herr Lipp and transsexual Barbara, is usually written by Pemberton and Shearsmith. They have sometimes written in other combinations: Gatiss with Pemberton, Dyson with Shearsmith, or solo, as Eric Idle did in Python. Dyson initially created Pop, Les, Lance and the Dentons alone, subsequently co-writing them with Gatiss. Shearsmith wrote Chris Frost, the embittered store detective (‘Chalk it up’) who makes a one-off appearance in series two, while Gatiss wrote mortician Owen

Fallowfield for the League's 1996 residency at the Canal Café in London and later revived him for series three.

The League's world grew out of two sets of influences. On the one hand, their cult status is inseparable from the film and TV references that proliferate in their work. As Jeremy Dyson once put it: 'we began to find that we were the living disproof of every criticism our parents and teachers had slung at us – it was precisely because we'd watched so much television that we were beginning to succeed'.⁸ This has given the League a very particular place in British culture, as both curators of popular culture and creators of a TV series that has already left its mark on popular memory. But they have largely managed to be more than the sum of their intertexts because there is also an element of 'real life' in the series. They often cite Alan Bennett and Victoria Wood as influences, influences that manifest themselves not through imitation but through an attentiveness to the humour in everyday speech and behaviour. Some of this everyday life was encountered directly, through encounters with eccentric landlords, wary shopkeepers and silvery hoteliers with glamorous wives. But just as much was extracted from the mediated 'reality' of daytime and reality TV, or documentaries about gender realignment.

Bretton Hall's alumnae include Colin Welland, Kay Mellor, Richard O'Brien, John Godber and Mark Thomas. In 2004, the college was deemed no longer financially viable, and its students moved to Leeds University campus in 2007. In an episode of Radio 4's *Front Row* celebrating the institution (3 May 2007), Gatiss and Pemberton struck a discordant note at the wake: 'We laughed' was Pemberton's mischievous response to its impending closure and the League members have never disguised their antipathy to the Theatre Arts course. The educational theatre group Legz Akimbo, whose would-be progressive plays about disability and sexuality fail to mask toe-curling condescension and ignorance, can be seen as a revenge on Bretton Hall. Nevertheless, the college occupies an important place in the team's formation; two other Bretton students would play key roles in what became the League of Gentlemen. Gordon Anderson (then Gordon Scott) had left Bretton Hall

for Leeds University, where he befriended Dyson. Anderson not only co-founded 606 Theatre with Pemberton, but introduced Dyson to Gatiss, to some initial resistance until an enduring friendship grew out of shared obsessions. Dyson recalls this meeting of minds and tastes:

I'd thought that these passions were completely private, and it was me who had this bizarre mixture of things, and to suddenly meet somebody who had almost the identical bizarre mixture of things that had developed for him independently was an amazing affirmation. It was so specific that (Mark) loved the dust jacket on the *Monty Python Bok* as much as I did, simultaneously loving (*Doctor Who* story) 'The Talons of Weng Chiang', simultaneously loving *Blood on Satan's Claw*. It was like winning the lottery that you could find somebody who had these things that were so disparate and yet so much aligned.

Simon Messingham, currently one half of comedy team Kirk and Messingham, was in the year above and worked with Gatiss and Pemberton on *Death Warmed Up*, among other things. Like Gatiss, he was a *Doctor Who* fan who would later write novels during that series' 'wilderness years'. At the end of 1994 and into 1995, he was (briefly) a 'Gentleman' in all but name when Anderson brought the five of them together to stage a sketch show called *This Is It!*. Gatiss remembers how it came about:

There was this festival called 'I Wish I'd Seen That' and the idea was to re-stage fringe shows that had gone down very well but hadn't had a very wide public at the Cockpit Theatre just off the Edgware Road. For one reason or another, (Anderson) had a five-night slot but no play. And Gordon approached me and Steve and Simon and Reece and Jeremy.

All five would perform in *This Is It!* 'What's remarkable about that show', says Dyson, 'is how much of it went on to be in the series.' Bernice (played by Dyson, 'the one thing I *could* do, actually') and Pauline were in the show, as was Geoff, at that time one of five

businessmen. An incompetent medium Mr Asmodeus did an act that would later be adopted by Papa Lazarou. Mr McCunn, a vicious PE teacher played by Gatiss, would become a stage regular but, in spite of a brief radio cameo, never made it to the TV series. Other material from *This Is It!* was unsuited to the unified town setting that would later distinguish the League, although some would resurface in the touring *Local Show for Local People* (2000–1), like two audience members at *Hamlet* who behave like football fans. Another featured earnest academics debating the politics of boy bands using gay imagery to sell records before, as Gatiss describes it, ‘they just descend into these giggly queens’, each declaring Robbie Williams to be his favourite. The show featured film and TV spoofs, including a spin on *Prime Suspect* (Granada/ITV, 1991–2006). As in subsequent pre-TV shows and the first half of the *Local Show*, the nascent Gents donned tuxedos, but also plastered on make-up; ‘it just *ran*, like Dirk Bogarde in *Death in Venice*’, laughs Gatiss.

Finding the right arena for the emerging show was not always easy. ‘We did a couple of gigs, one in King’s Cross, and it was like a stand-up show’, recalls Gatiss.

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We had a ten-minute slot and it just died a death. It started well because we were doing direct address stuff, but in any sketch people were talking and we quickly realised we needed our own night where all the rules are set by you.

One such night, or rather four, took place at the Komedia Theatre in Brighton in September 1995. Messingham had moved on,⁹ Dyson was no longer performing, and the resulting division of labour now had a name. Other titles like ‘The Porn Dwarves’ and ‘The Assassination Bureau’ were mooted, but Gatiss’s suggestion was the winner:

At that stage I didn’t realise that ‘The League of Gentlemen’ had been used by Robert Fripp as a prog rock group. It was the original name of the followers of the Scarlet Pimpernel, which is where it comes from, and to me it was just a lovely old film.¹⁰ I thought, ‘That rather suits’ and of course everything went from there. I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if we looked like a very old-fashioned revue group but we were anything but, we were actually rather nasty?’

Brighton would yield another important part of the League's world. On a day trip to Rottingdean, a suspicious local shopkeeper would plant a seed that would grow into the series' two most widely recognised characters.

At the end of 1995, the League staged a show at the Tristram Bates Theatre in Covent Garden, expressly to attract notorious comedy management company Avalon. The League's drag-heavy repertoire was possibly not what macho Avalon was looking for, and the Gents would later sign with the quirkiest PBJ, home of Reeves and Mortimer, Eddie Izzard, Rowan Atkinson and Chris Morris. A key turning point would come in April 1996, when they began the first of two residencies at the Canal Café in London, performing every Monday night. With a growing gallery of characters (the Dentons and Herr Lipp emerged at the Canal Café), they hit on a strategy for getting audiences to come back, as Gatiss explains:

we had this whole rolling schedule thing of changing a sketch or two a week, so that at the end of the month it was a new show. We did a three-month residency, which gave us loads of material, but it also meant if people wanted to come again four weeks later they'd effectively have a whole new show to see.

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'Never the same show twice!' claimed the posters. There was, in Dyson's words, 'an element of expediency' in this approach, but it often took the form of an increasing element of seriality. 'Because we were getting people coming back, it seemed only logical, I suppose, to write instalments, serials', confirms Gatiss. They even brought some of the storylines to a close, he recalls:

Mr McCunn had a huge breakdown, Pauline stabbed Ross in the eye. The Dentons ended with Benjamin being changed into a toad. The local shop ended with me as Lord Local, basically Lord Summerisle (from *The Wicker Man*), coming in. They were six-parters, I suppose.

The League made their first appearance at the Edinburgh Festival in 1996. When they returned the following year, they would win the Perrier Award, the first sketch show to do so since Cambridge Footlights in 1981.¹¹ The Perrier had lost some of its cultural capital in the 1980s, scorned by the ‘alternative’ comedians of the era, but it had begun to mean something again in the 1990s. Dyson attributes this to Steve Coogan winning it in 1992, even though his emergence seemed a mixed blessing for the League. ‘I remember Mark ringing me when (Coogan’s character) Paul Calf first went out and he said, “That’s it, we’ve missed the boat.” You know, we were fucked – he’s gone and done it!’ Coogan represented what they were aiming for themselves, ‘that fusion of brilliantly naturalistic performance fused with the British Vaudeville and Variety elements that we also loved’. Coogan seemed like a contemporary manifestation of the kind of performers the three actors in the League aspired to, such as Leonard Rossiter, Alec Guinness, Alastair Sim and Ronnie Barker, actors who specialised in comedy, rather than comedians. He had even anticipated the use of a unifying town, Ottele, for the six characters he would play in the otherwise self-contained episodes of *Coogan’s Run* (BBC2, 1995).

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Edinburgh 1997 won the League the Perrier, but Edinburgh 1996 had already won them a radio series. Producer Sarah Smith had come to see them, and would play a major role in honing the version of the League that would appear on television. As producer, director and script editor, Smith has retained an association with ‘dark’ or controversial comedy. She would go on to work on the notorious *Brass Eye Special* (Channel 4, 2001) that satirised the media’s sensationalisation of paedophilia, and produced *Nighty Night* (BBC3, 2004–5). Gatiss characterises the relationship as ‘combative’ but ‘fruitful’, with many ‘lively debates’ about what the show would be. Dyson confirms that she

had a kind of clear grasp of what the thing was at the heart of what we did that was different from what other people did. That was really the process over those three years, from ‘94 through to the radio series, a gradual weeding out of the kind of stuff that other people might have done.

The League have always worn their influences on their collective sleeve, but by the time of their first TV series, to say that they were unique was more than hype because a lot of work had gone into ensuring that that was the case. Smith was particularly keen for them to place all their characters in the same town as they transferred to broadcast media, ‘Spent’ on the radio and ‘Royston Vasey’ on TV. She was producer and script editor of the radio series and the first television series before handing over to Jemma Rodgers. *On the Town with The League of Gentlemen* was broadcast on Radio 4 from 6 November to 11 December 1997 and would win them their second award, the Sony Silver. It would not be their last trophy; BAFTAs (Best Comedy Series, Best Costume Design), Royal Television Society Awards (Best Entertainment Series, Best Costume, Best Production Design, Best Title Music) and the Golden Rose of Montreux would follow after the TV series was broadcast. Even series three, which received a more divided reception, won the *South Bank Show* Comedy Award.

In the buildup to their first series, the League used their ‘fringe’ origins one last time. The radio series had added a few new characters, of whom Dr Chinnery would be particularly important. In a series of shows at the Gatehouse Theatre in Highgate, they tried out some new characters created for the TV series; Pop, Les McQueen and Papa Lazarou, who would not start abducting wives until series two.

If Sarah Smith played a crucial role in helping shape *The League of Gentlemen* for radio and then television, several other collaborators played important roles in the TV series and remained constant members of the creative team. Director Steve Bendelack had a particularly distinguished track record in TV comedy (*Spitting Image* [ITV, 1984–96], *The Royle Family* [BBC1, 1998–2000], *Little Britain*), and would also direct their film and post-TV live shows.¹² Other important contributors were production designer Grenville Horner, whose assistant Sarah Kane was credited as art director from the Christmas Special onwards, costume designer Yves Barre and director of photography Rob Kitzmann. Joby Talbot has been the League’s regular composer since series one. Positioned somewhere between pop (his work with the Divine Comedy) and modern classical (Classic FM

Composer in Residence), Talbot was not an obvious candidate to create ‘comedy’ music, but scored to the Gothic, melodramatic and even unexpectedly poignant qualities in the series. The Christmas Special alone features about thirty minutes of original music and is possibly the high point of their collaboration. One of his most beautiful pieces was the subject of some controversy when the final episode of series three was transmitted on BBC2, the elegiac end-title music notoriously ruined by an announcer and an early example of ‘credit-squeezing’. ‘I went *apoplectic*,’ Gatiss recalls.

I rang Jon Plowman. I was crying because of course we had actually spoken a lot beforehand to (the BBC trailer department) and I said, ‘This may well be the end, this beautiful piece of music. Can we treasure, for once, the moment of transmission?’ And they said ‘Yes’, and then they fucking talked over it!

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After presenting their characters in tuxedos on stage and then on radio, the Gents had to fix the look of their characters for television. While the make-up designs were simpler in execution than they might have seemed (a full latex head in series three was abandoned), they did become an essential part of *The League of Gentlemen* and a progression from the sellotape used to push up Tubbs and Edward’s noses on stage. One might therefore expect an ‘authorial’ figure comparable to Horner or Barre to have handled make-up on the series. Instead, the job changed hands several times, always with input from the Gents themselves, as Gatiss explains:

We did a forty minute version of episode 1 in the July of 1998, and then we began shooting the rest of it in the autumn, after [BBC2 controller] Mark Thompson said yes. That pilot was set up by Helen Barrett in cahoots with us, and our drawings and our suggestions kind of set the look of the characters. So when Vanessa White came in to do the series, it was essentially carrying that on, and then after two years, for the Special, we moved to Daniel Phillips, and then for the third series, his assistant [Diane Chenery-Wickens].

Another distinguished name on the credits took a more hands-off role. Jon Plowman, BBC's Head of Comedy from 1994 to 2007, was executive producer on the series. '(He) would routinely turn up with a sheaf of notes two days before transmission and we'd just go "It's too late!"' laughs Gatiss.

Having provided an overview of the League of Gentlemen as a team and an evolving enterprise that would form the basis of the TV series, it is time to turn our attention more directly to that series. 'Special Stuff' examines *The League of Gentlemen's* cult credentials, placing it in the context of 'alternative' comedy on TV but also considering less overtly comic qualities, such as its 'darkness' and its creation of a 'world'. 'Local' focuses particularly on series one and two, which draw mainly on material developed in the live shows but incorporate it into loose story arcs. It also considers the series' sense of place and its regional identity. 'Pandemonium Carnival' looks at the Gothic aspects of the series, with particular emphasis on the Christmas Special and the figure of Papa Lazarou. The final chapter 'Follow the Red Bag' deals with the third series, and is rather more evaluative in approach. While series three's initial reception was mixed, with many regarding it as a disappointment, its reputation has improved and re-evaluation seems overdue. Our journey begins: Destination Royston Vasey. It goes without saying that you'll never ... well, you know.

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