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British TV Comedy: Cultural Concepts and Contexts

The Rag Trade

“Everybody Out!” Gender, Politics and Class on the Factory Floor

The BBC television situation comedy *The Rag Trade* (series one BBC 1961-63, revived LWT 1977-78) chronicled the weekly exploits of a group of female machinists employed at Fenner Fashions - a small clothing factory in east London. Led by their clever, manipulative shop steward Paddy (Miriam Karlin), the women were constantly in conflict with the factory's owner Harold Fenner (Peter Jones). Paddy was always ready to call a strike on the slightest of pretexts, initiated by her rallying cry and catch phrase “Everybody Out”.¹ In total, five series of *The Rag Trade* were made. Series one to three were broadcast on the BBC between 1961 and 1963 in a prime Friday night viewing slot. After a gap of fourteen years, the series was revived by London Weekend Television (LWT) for a further two series from 1977-78, broadcast on Sunday evenings. This chapter concerns *The Rag Trade*'s first and most notable incarnation, however the reimagining of the series for the late 1970s will be considered towards the end of the chapter when examining the further development of the series.

The Rag Trade followed what Mintz identifies as the traditionally recognised formula for a television situation comedy:

A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we generally find the same people in the same setting. The episodes are finite whatever happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour. (Mintz in Mills 28)

Each week, whatever chaotic events took place in the factory, usually revolving around the women's attempts to evade work, schemes to make extra money, union disputes or the farcical mix ups that ensued when strangers came into the

factory, everything returned to the status quo by the end of the episode, with each fresh episode beginning as if nothing untoward had happened the week before.

The series was created by Ronald Wolfe and Ronald Chesney, who met professionally as writers on the BBC radio comedy *Educating Archie* (1950-1960), a series featuring ventriloquist Peter Brough and his dummy Archie Andrews. Wolfe and Chesney continued as a writing partnership working on a television version of *Educating Archie* (ITV 1958-59). It was conceived at a time when some of the earliest British television comedies were being written and broadcast. Most significant and successful amongst these were *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC 1956-1961) and *Steptoe and Son* (1962-1974), both written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, who are generally regarded as having created and established the blueprint for what became the British television situation comedy. *The Rag Trade*, like *Hancock* and *Steptoe and Son*, focused on the trials and tribulations of ordinary, everyday British life. At a period in the late 1950s and early 1960s when so-called 'kitchen-sink realism' and its gritty depiction of working-class life was emergent in British art, literature, theatre and cinema, *The Rag Trade*, with its factory-floor setting and female ensemble cast of smart opinionated working class women accorded with something of the current cultural mood. It is these women who are at the centre of the narrative, driving the action and constantly challenging the management personified by factory owner Mr Fenner. At the same time, the series offered, through these women's frequent triumphs over authority and limiting middle-class convention, an implicit celebration of female, working-class strength and ingenuity.

At the same time, *The Rag Trade* shared common ground with a popular film comedy of the period: *I'm Alright Jack* (1959). Naïve, well-meaning Oxford University graduate Stanley Windrush's (Ian Carmichael) general ineptitude means he fails to secure a permanent job in industry. His unscrupulous uncle (Dennis Price) sets him up with a job in a local munitions factory, where Windrush's enthusiastic suggestions as to how to improve workplace productivity end up causing an all-out strike. *I'm Alright Jack* picked up on contemporary unease about the perceived growing strength of the trade unions and satirised such developments, with Peter Sellers giving a memorable performance as militant shop steward Fred Kite. Comic comparisons can be drawn between Kite and *The Rag Trade*'s Paddy's constant rallying of their

workforce to take action against what they perceived as unreasonable management demands.

The Rag Trade drew upon the working worlds that both Wolfe and Chesney knew from their own lives. In *Writing Comedy: A Guide to Scriptwriting for TV, Radio, Film, and Stage*, Wolfe wrote of *The Rag Trade* and its origins:

The first sitcom that Chesney and I wrote was set in a dressmaking factory. The one reason for the success of the show -*The Rag Trade*- was that we really knew what we were writing about. The setting was authentic and realistic. Chesney at one time had a business share in a clothing factory, while I had worked on the bench in a factory making radio equipment. (Wolfe 94)

Wolfe saw their experiences both as a fertile source for comedy writing and something that viewers would be able to connect with: “From my experiences there, I always thought there would be a good series about factory life” (*Ibid* 94), continuing that, “With our personal recollections we were never short of story lines for *The Rag Trade*. The secret of the show was not only we knew what we were writing about but many of our viewers worked in factories and could identify with the situations” (*Ibid* 94).

The daily goings-on of the factory staff he and Chesney observed did indeed provide much of the raw material which formed the basis of both plots and comedy in *The Rag Trade*. Such goings-on involved every possible ruse to avoid work, or do as little as possible while you were there. Wolfe recalled that, “When work got a bit boring we’d creep into the toilets for a smoke and chat or sit in the cubicles for a quick read, do our football pools or have a little snooze” (Wolfe 96). Management’s response as he recalled it, and the workers’ reaction, is dramatised in encounters that he and Chesney wrote for *The Rag Trade*. Thus, “The management worried about our low production – tried to time the workers in and out of the toilets. The workers immediately called a lightning strike and there was even less production” (Wolfe 96). He also recalled other activities that took place when work should have been going on: “But life in the factory didn’t just consist of skiving; there was also pilfering, petty larceny and romantic assignations between the factory boys and girls which usually took place behind the factory during working hours of course”. All the events described found their way into the *Rag Trade* plots.

Finally, Wolfe highlighted the type of disruptive real-life incidents which were to drive the highly physical comedy of *The Rag Trade*. He mentions pranks played with the hated time clock on which the workers had to clock in every day: “There were various ways of cheating the time clock. Sometimes we would squirt glue into the clock to slow it down; other times we would arrange for a couple of the lads to get in early and clock in the rest of us who staggered in later” (Wolfe 96). Also, “fiddling the clock was great fun especially on the night shift. We’d clock in at eight o’clock at night, sneak out go home, and come back at six a.m., creep in and pretend we had been working all night” (Wolfe 96). In episode three of series one the plot revolves around Fenner’s installation of a time clock to increase the women’s productivity.

The Rag Trade and the Female Ensemble Cast

What is particularly significant about *The Rag Trade* is that in contrast to the contemporary male-dominated domestic comedies which surrounded it such as *Hancock* and *Step toe*, this series had a female ensemble cast, and moreover one located in the workplace. Such a cast and location were extremely rare for the television of the period, a time when women figured most frequently in their domestic roles as girlfriends, wives and mothers. The only other real equivalent could be found in *Compact* (BBC 1962-5), a soap opera written by *Crossroads* creators Hazel Adair and Peter Ling, and set in the offices of an upmarket woman’s magazine populated by a predominantly female staff.² However, in comparison to the polite middle class atmosphere of *Compact*, the working class female factory staff was loud, boisterous, unruly and disruptive, the distinctive, uninhibited, collective, female working-class culture on display not being much in evidence on BBC television at this time. This culture which is the driving force of *The Rag Trade* and which positioned women as “subjects of a laughter which expresses anger, resistance, solidarity and joy or those which show women using in disruptive challenging ways the spectacle already invested in them as objects of a masculine gaze” (Rowe Karlyn 5) will be examined in greater depth throughout the chapter.

Filmed before a live studio audience, the style of *The Rag Trade* was overtly theatrical with much of the action taking place essentially on one stage set divided into three spaces - the factory floor, Fenner’s office and the women’s rest room located at opposite ends of the stage. The dressing of the set, with

bulky machines and cluttered work benches, nods again to the early 1960s 'kitchen-sink' films of social realism, in this case in particular to the opening scenes of the contemporaneous film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) in which factory worker Arthur Seaton (Albert Finney) is seen working belligerently at his lathe, making it clear that he will do only as much for the management as suits him. This is an attitude which in their own comedic way the women at Fenner's factory share with him. In *The Rag Trade* the television audience was watching effectively live theatre captured on camera. The performances of the cast are clearly inflected by the fact that they are playing to a physically present audience whom they can see and hear clearly in the television studio. The cast react to the laughter or gasps of surprise and pleasure which their schemes, antics, and fast talking rejoinders to management criticisms or complaints engender. The timing of the funny lines and the extension of bits of comedy business expands or slows down in response to audience laughter, and the cast members' interplay with each other is reactive, an instinctive response to how this interplay is going down with the audience.

This style of comedy performance is in marked contrast to the low key mockumentary style of another workplace comedy i.e. Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant's *The Office* (BBC 2001-3) in which the audience are meant to be watching people simply going about their daily workplace routines, with performances governed by the tropes of a documentary style non-fiction naturalism.

The professional backgrounds of the principal cast members of *The Rag Trade* lay in theatre, film, radio, variety, dance and even music-hall, which meant that they were skilled in delivering a performance in which one of the key elements was their ability to relate to a live audience. As will be demonstrated later in the analysis of a selected episode the cast's ability to sing and dance was drawn on and exploited. The two leads, Miriam Karlin and Peter Jones, had had extensive professional careers prior to *The Rag Trade*. Karlin had attended the renowned RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) in London and featured in a number of theatrical revues; most notably a ground breaking British musical theatre production about contemporary London working-class life '*Fings Ain't What They Used to Be*.

'Fings Ain't What They Used to Be which ran from 1959-1962 was a musical about the London underworld set in a low-life Soho of the late 1950s, and starred a cast of thieves, prostitutes, gamblers and corrupt police. Lead

character Fred, newly out of prison, returns to find his brothel and gambling den under threat and a London he no longer recognises. Music was by the composer Lionel Bart who went on to write the musical *Oliver*, and the writer Frank Norman was himself a former petty criminal. It was directed by the pioneering director Joan Littlewood and played at her improvisational theatre workshop company's base in Stratford East in the east end of London. Littlewood was noted for her experimental, left-wing improvisational style. Nadine Holdsworth describes '*Fings Ain't What They Used to Be* as having "flamboyant music hall style theatricality" (Holdsworth 23), and as for Karlin's performance in *The Rag Trade* Holdsworth's observations also hold true. Paddy is centre stage throughout each episode of *The Rag Trade*, implicitly engaged with both the studio audience and the wider audience beyond the studio with whom she communicates through the camera lens. Her delivery of her lines, her range of expressions, her knowing delivery has exactly the flamboyant music-hall style Holdsworth documents.³ Additionally, two other cast members who played young machinists had both starred in the Stratford east production of '*Fings Ain't What They Used to Be*. They were Barbara Windsor, best known for her work in the *Carry On* series of British comedy films, and Toni Palmer. Jones, like Karlin, had worked in the theatre as well as cinema. Of the other two main characters Carol, Paddy's dizzy disruptive sidekick, was played by Sheila Hancock who had also attended RADA. She had made many stage appearances throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, and had a role in Joan Littlewood's theatre workshop production of the short novel *Make Me an Offer*.⁴ Reg Varney, who played hapless foreman Reg had a background in music hall and variety and had also worked in pubs and clubs. Finally there was Esma Cannon who played the diminutive bewildered Lilly ('little Lill'), childlike both in stature and behaviour, she most often acted as a physical comedy stooge or foil for the rest of the cast. Cannon was an Australian who came to Britain as a young woman, initially for a career in theatre, but subsequently appeared in a substantial number of successful British films as well as the *Carry On* series prior to *The Rag Trade*.

Although *The Rag Trade* ran for three series in its first incarnation, recordings remain of only the first two. Early television recordings are scarce with limited numbers of titles having been preserved.⁵ The enormous popularity of *The Rag Trade* and the commercial possibilities of exporting the format may go some way to explaining why these two series have survived.⁶ In this next part of the chapter I will offer a textual analysis of the two selected episodes of the series

taken from series one and series two respectively. The episodes have been chosen because they are representative of the series as a whole and because they offer strong examples of the range of comedy performance and material to be found across the two series. Additionally, they reflect stylistic changes in *The Rag Trade* from series one to two. While the formula of the women's disruptive behaviour and the ensuing trouble this causes remains unchanged throughout, as do the characters' behaviour and personalities, in the episode from series two the performance is more overtly theatrical – in fact essentially meta-performance – the women are seen rehearsing and performing songs, dances, poems and recitations for a fund-raising concert they intend to deliver. Such performances serve to reinforce a rich, long established, shared working-class oral cultural heritage of stories, songs, recitations and verbal and physical jokes synergised with more topical references which they deploy constantly to undercut and sabotage the conduct and working performance expected of them on the shop floor. Further, their physical and verbal unruliness present a challenge to conventional contemporary assumptions around the types of behaviour that might be expected of women.

Topicality in *The Rag Trade*

This 'performance within the performance' trope is something which seems to have developed over the course of series two. That the cast are now well established, and as the viewing figures evidence well liked, the viewers are given bigger, bolder exaggerated versions of these characters which play on the actors' own theatrical skills, exploiting their ability to sing, dance, play musical instruments and be something other than their comic *Rag Trade* incarnations. As in the case of *Hancock* or *Steptoe* it is the characters and anticipated reactions and behaviours of Paddy, Fenner, Carol, and Reg, Lilly *et al* more than any situation they encounter which lay at the heart of *The Rag Trade* as it developed.

The background to the comedy is, in both episodes and both series, a broad satirical take on the power of the unions in the British workplace of the period. However, the humour is not overtly topical, aside from infrequent throwaway reference to events of the period. A nod is made to well-known political speeches of the time such as Fenner's reference to then Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's oft-quoted comment on the much improved British economic

landscape of the late 1950s and early 1960s - "Most of our people have never had it so good".⁷ Fenner tells the women about how fortunate they are to work for him, remarking, "I know you've never had it so good" (1:2) and in reference to another Macmillan speech given in Cape Town in 1960, popularly known as the 'Winds of Change' in which he signalled Britain's intention to grant independence to British colonies in Africa. Fenner tells his workforce in response to their poor performance that, "The winds of change will blow through this workroom" (2:7). In the very first episode (1:1) there is reference to how long ago clothes were cut out: "That two-piece polkadot babydoll I cut out at the time of Suez".⁸

Rather, the action and humour were embedded implicitly within the culture of everyday working-class life in early 1960s Britain. There was humour at the expense of the fashions and customs of the period - the damage caused to fixtures and fittings by the girls' fashionable pointed toed stiletto shoes, Carol's daily journey to the factory on her modish motor scooter which caused her to arrive frequently late, flustered and to much comic impact, plus the girls' constant use of the omnipresent portable transistor radio to cause noise and disruption within the factory. Also, much to the fore were the popular fashions of the period. The factory women wore tight skirts and sweaters, and had dark, heavy eye makeup and teased beehive hair in imitation of the look of film stars of the day such as Brigitte Bardot and Elizabeth Taylor. Their look and style is especially representative of popular working-class female culture. Finally in the chosen episodes the women are making short 'babydoll' nightdresses and Capri pants, both of which first came into fashion in Britain the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The first episode to be considered is the sixth from the first series (the episodes were not named). The plot revolves around the girls' habit of eating in the workroom, which has resulted in food-stained garments and returned orders. The opening titles for series one are different to those for the second series. A vintage sewing machine is pictured with the words *The Rag Trade* being sewn through as if they were on a piece of cloth. The change in titles from the sewing machine, representative of the business of making clothes in which the women were engaged, to the later titles in which it is the rowdy character of the factory women themselves as represented by the image of the cloth puppet suggests that in series two, as will be developed shortly, the emphasis is as much on the

women as characters over and above the situations around which the episode revolves.

The scene opens, as is frequently the case, in Fenner's office. It is a small, cluttered, disorganised space, every bit as chaotic as the factory floor and highly suggestive of Fenner's lack of control over what is actually going on. His staff exploit his lack of organisation and system, outwitting and tricking him with frequency and ease. Within this office space a key trope of the series is perpetually re-enacted. Fenner is frequently presented offering assurances to buyers that the women are top-class workers, and above all highly motivated. Inevitably there will be a cut to a scene in which the women can be seen doing anything but work. The workroom represents an almost exclusively female space in which a supportive female culture prevails and one which pointedly excludes Fenner. It is appropriated as a place in which the women feel comfortable, and is firmly established as their territory. The 'them and us' relationship is such that the women always have a tray placed outside Fenner's door which falls noisily to the floor alerting them to his passage in and out of the office.

In this episode a client, Mr Lever, is angrily pointing out the poor quality of the clothes he has been sent. While Fenner protests the high quality of the work, Lever pulls out garments with a range of stains on them, most noticeably a large greasy black handprint clearly on the back of a dress. Fenner continues to extol the quality and workmanship of the garment, only for the client to extract lumps of cheese and pieces of lettuce from the pockets. The farcical, larger than life quality of the performances and situation is evident in this piece of theatrical business, as is Fenner's retort that, "there is no eating in my work room. I am adamant about this to the point of finicky", and "my girls wouldn't dream of flouting my wishes". Cut then to the contrasting environment of the women in the workroom doing exactly what Fenner says they are not. This is another comic set piece with the women working together as a comic ensemble. This feels very similar to a routine that might be performed on stage in a variety show or as part of a British pantomime.⁹ One of the women, Brenda, is frying eggs on an upturned hot iron, Carol is frying bacon on another, while Lilly wrestles unsuccessfully with dressmaking scissors to cut up a slice of bread – Paddy grabs the bread to soften it up in the clothing press, then Carol irons the damp pieces to warm them up. The set piece ends with Carol rushing over to use the kettle in which Lilly already has an egg boiling. The over-the-top

demonstration of the girls' flouting of the no-eating rule is further underlined when Paddy hands round fish and chips and bread rolls with sausages inside. This provides the opportunity for one of the other key tropes of the series, which is Paddy reading out union rules to put Fenner into as awkward a position as possible: "May I quote from section three of the Fenner's Union Amenities Agreement: twice a day staff will be allowed to stop work for a ten-minute tea period". One of the sources of humour which runs throughout the series is the parodic use of trade union discourse which is one of Paddy's most exploited strategies and which sends up the kind of language in circulation at the time. The fact that this language comes from women, especially when Paddy refers to them as 'brothers', adds further to the contemporary comedy of the situation in that it is women who are enforcing the union party line. Women workers and their concerns had little visibility in discourses of the late 1950s and early 1960s surrounding trade union discord.

The episode's other comic highlight comes when Fenner's response to this is the installation of a vending machine. The arrival of the machine makes for yet more physical comedy. Paddy's initial reaction is that the machine will prevent them from taking prolonged breaks to eat. Her response is sabotage, pouring a bucket of waste into the machine. Reg performs a series of comedy falls as he slips in the liquid the machine then emits. It is then discovered that shirt buttons will work as payment instead of money and women can be seen making ostentatious multiple purchases from the machine. Of course the episode ends with the button ruse discovered and the machine broken. It does not reappear in the next episode: the slate is wiped clean and the status quo returns.

The second episode selected for close analysis is also full of physical comedy set pieces, double entendres and comic innuendoes, but also contains song and dance numbers of the kind that might be expected to appear in a variety show, like for example the popular Sunday night televising of the weekly variety performance which took place at the London Palladium theatre. The over-arching theme of the episode is illicit rehearsals for the Grand Union Concert to be performed by the Fenner's Workers concert party. In this episode, the actors' theatrical background is showcased as they perform songs, dance, play musical instruments and demonstrate the kind of comic repartee redolent of the music hall and the variety stage which preceded the television situation comedy but in which many of the cast of *The Rag Trade* had significant

experience and on which they drew for their television work. In this episode the cast bring to the television situation comedy something of the liveness and dynamism of their theatre work, as well as a direct connection with both the live studio audience and the television audience whom they can be seen simultaneously addressing through their work with the studio cameras.

The episode opens with Lilly's ostentatiously bad rendition of the religious song "Oh for the Wings of a Dove" drawing on her role as the innocent comedy stooge. This is quickly interrupted by Reg practising his accordion. That the actor Reg Varney was known for his musical skill again demonstrates the oscillation between the cast's portrayal of their fictional character and their own professional skillset. Paddy is also shown briefly practising her shop steward's song, done with the knowing confidence which once more evokes the actress and performer Miriam Karlin beyond the role of Paddy the shop steward. Both performances demonstrate their real life performing skills and personalities beyond the parameters of the fictional performances in *The Rag Trade*.

The concert troop's rehearsals reappear further in the episode but the action returns once again to the comic mix-up and disruptive behaviour which will drive the plot element of the episode. Fenner has to produce an order of babydoll nighties. The women are, as always, behind schedule with the order and in addition Carol, tasked with modelling the garment for the customer, tries it on over her outdoor clothes which looks ridiculous and causes the customer to say he wants to cancel the order. This plot point is however temporarily cast aside as concert rehearsals for the women take precedence. Once again the atmosphere is that of the variety show, with all the cast dressing up and in this instance notably cross-dressing pantomime-style. Carol uses a pile of feathered hats to perform a kind of comically pseudo-erotic fan dance. Paddy appears cross-dressed in a sailor suit making innuendos about the construction of the suit and how awkward the pockets and flaps would be if in fact she was male: a charade which she mock seriously carries out. If Paddy is playing with pantomimic male drag then Reg, dressed in a comic parody of stereotypical Scottish Highland dress and wearing an extremely brief kilt, plays with female identity. Much is made of the kilt's resemblance to a woman's skirt especially when Reg performs a jig, waving his kilt in an exaggeratedly feminine fashion. Paddy and Reg's cross-dressing is the subject of much ribald comment from the rest of the women. Dressing up and especially cross dressing are an integral part

of the popular British pantomime theatrical tradition which informs the performance style of *The Rag Trade*. Dressing up and trying on costumes allows for the exploration of new identities; in the case of pantomimic cross-dressing new sexual identities. In a comedy where women have the traditionally male upper hand, the further assumption of male identity by dressing in male drag reinforces the series' interrogation of traditional gender roles. Further, foreman Reg's adoption of feminine attire and behaviour reinforces his customary positioning, within the series, as under the direction and control of the women, in a sense playing a stereotypically 'female' foil to their 'masculine' behaviour. Indeed, throughout *The Rag Trade* costume and performance allow for polysemic readings of gender identity by allowing the women to mock and undermine, most significantly, male authority by a parodic assumption of it. At the same time male assumptions about femininity are questioned when stereotypes of feminine behaviour are presented, typically, again by Reg playing a woman contrasted with the very strong and assertive real women who surround him on the factory floor. As Judith Butler writes in her introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of her classic 1989 work on gender and identity *Gender Trouble*, "I sought to counter those views that made limits and presumptions about the limits and proprieties of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to prescribed notions about masculinity and femininity" (Butler VII). In its use of costume and disguise *The Rag Trade* challenges such limits and restrictions surrounding notions of gender.

The remainder of the episode is dominated by costume and performance nominally dictated by the staff's ongoing concert rehearsals which are taking the place of any concentration on work. In fact it seems almost as if the episode has become in effect a live variety performance. Lilly is attired as a mermaid and positioned along two chairs singing to a banjo accompaniment. Reg wears Victorian bathing costume and practises his song and dance routine. The chaotic atmosphere culminates with Paddy in yet another male guise – this time as a cowboy singing a parody country and western tune which makes fun of Fenner as a manager. Meanwhile Carol and a group of women have put on a Charleston routine dressed as 1920s flappers (in the order of babydoll nighties which they have customised to their own purposes). This in fact resolves the plot as the buyer decides he would like to buy the refashioned night dresses. The final scene has Fenner himself appear, apparently to catch the women out, only to be told it's a benefit to raise money for Fenner himself. At this point he bursts into

song. himself. In a broader sense, the women's forceful disruptive performances have effectively toppled the established order, the women's use of costume and forceful evocation of their shared cultural repertoire have absorbed Fenner himself into this unruly female society which is now dominant. That a solution of sorts emerges from the chaos seems almost incidental. As before, the events of this episode have no impact on the next week.

The Rag Trade and Seriality

Seriality is not significant to the structure of *The Rag Trade*, in the sense that there are no ongoing long-term plot developments such as might be seen in the demonstrably anti-traditional sitcoms such as *The Office* or the ongoing political satire of *The Thick of It* (BBC 2005-2012), in which a definite progression in events and development of character can be observed. With Paddy, Fenner, Reg and the rest of women the 'who' rather than the 'what' and 'why' is most important for those who watch. For if in *The Office* one of the pleasures for the viewer is watching the development of character and situation – will Dawn and Tim finally get together and will David Brent finally understand and even begin to rectify his egotistical workplace behaviour – in *The Rag Trade* the overriding theme is to watch the cast of characters being absolutely and unreconstructedly themselves whatever the situation. Indeed if anything the characters seem almost to become even more exaggerated theatrical versions of themselves as the second series progresses. It is these ever expanding performances of the unruly self rather than narrative progression which become in effect the narrative of the series.

The Rag Trade was replicated almost exactly by Chesney and Wolfe in *Wild Wild Women* (BBC 1969). Set in 1902, it was a reworking of *The Rag Trade*, with Barbara Windsor playing Millie who, like Paddy, led a group of women working this time in a hatmaker's shop. *Wild Wild Women* lasted only one series. It did not, it would appear, have the appeal of *The Rag Trade*. Perhaps its location as a period situation comedy meant it lacked the contemporary, up-to-date appeal of its predecessor. While identifiable workplace battles, concerns and behaviours of the present day engaged the viewers, such issues located some sixty years earlier and in an historical context were possibly less likely to have the same kind of appeal. Such was the enduring popularity of the original *Rag Trade* that it was revived and remade in 1977 by London Weekend

Television, with Jones and Karlin reprising their roles as Paddy and Fenner. The remake ran for two series, most of the scripts being based on the BBC episodes from the 1960s. However in a Britain which had been affected by widespread strike action in the mid-1970s and which two years later was to elect a Conservative government which took a very harsh line on union power generally, a militant trade union leader and her propensity to call out the workforce had much less appeal.

Actors from *The Rag Trade* went on to star in other comedies written for them by Chesney and Wolfe. Sheila Hancock took the lead in *The Bedsit Girl* (BBC 1965-66), playing a young typist living in a one-room flat (the eponymous bedsit) who wants to make more of her life. Most famously, Reg Varney went on to become one of the leads in one of Britain's most popular sitcoms *On The Buses* (ITV 1969-1973). The formula was broadly similar to *The Rag Trade*, with Varney as a bus driver who along with his co-workers spent their time trying to outwit the management in the bus depot where they worked. Although a great favourite at the time, *On The Buses* now makes for rather uncomfortable viewing, with much of the humour derived from what would today be unacceptable attitudes, in particular to race and gender. *On The Buses'* female characters are very much subsidiary ones, most frequently the butt of any humour. Instead of the confident, outspoken and street smart female cast of *The Rag Trade* women are generally depicted either as malleable sexy 'glamour girls' or unattractive objects of male derision and contempt.

The Rag Trade, with its ensemble cast of strong disruptive women orchestrating fast physical comic farce in the workplace, makes for very innovative female television comedy, unusual both for its time and more generally in the historical context of funny women on television. *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC 1992-2003), in which Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley, surrounded by a female ensemble cast, play Eddie Monsoon and Patsy Stone – hard-drinking, drug-addled party animals whose assertive physical comedy has been justifiably singled out for its spirited portrayal of women behaving very badly indeed. Yet this kind of pioneering female comedy could have been seen some thirty years earlier in *The Rag Trade*. The fact that it was not until 1992 that a comparable British female ensemble comedy could be found, points to the singularity of kind of comedy that was *The Rag Trade* and the achievement it represented. It also of course alludes to the fact that despite the popularity of *The Rag Trade*

and its female stars the female comedy ensemble did not become a regularly-replicated comedy format on British television. Although there is not the space to do so here, the absence of female comedies which follow the pattern of *The Rag Trade* is worthy of further investigation and debate. One reason for this could be the historical dearth of women writing British television comedy.¹⁰

The Rag Trade, firmly anchored in the skills and traditions of stage craft and live performance, might be adjudged as very much in the mould of early British television comedy. That it is a group of working-class women who create the comedy makes it a very significant series in narrative histories of British television comedy. Critically, in the women's deployment of the traditions of British theatrical performance that the series opens up, spaces in which discourses of class, gender and identity surrounding these working class women can be explored and interrogated.

Filmography

Absolutely Fabulous (BBC 1992-96), (BBC 2001-2006), (BBC 2011-12)

I'm Alright Jack (1959)

Butterflies (BBC 1978-1983)

On the Buses (LWT 1969-1973), *On the Buses* (film 1971), *Mutiny on the Buses* (film 1972), *Holiday on the Buses*, (film 1973)

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1960)

Solo (BBC 1981-3)

The Bedsit Girl (BBC 1965-66)

The Rag Trade (BBC 1961-63), (LWT 1977-78)

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¹ The shop steward is the elected representative of a workplace trade union.

² *Crossroads* (1964-2003) was an ITV soap opera set in a motel in the midlands of England

³ British music hall, congruent with American vaudeville, denotes live theatrical variety performances, music, singing, dancing, comedy turns and speciality acts.

⁴ *Make me an offer* by Wolf Mankowitz was about an antique dealer in search of the Portland vase

⁵ Dick Fiddy's (2001). *Missing-Believed Wiped: Searching for the Lost Treasures of British Television* chronicles the narratives and rationales surrounding historical television programmes' survival or disappearance, citing beliefs such as lack of storage space, the economies of recording over reusable videotape and a perceived lack of interest in black-and-white programmes with the advent of colour.

⁶ *The Rag Trade* has been remade by Australian, Norwegian, Portuguese and South African television

⁷ Made in 1957 when Macmillan was speaking at a Tory rally in Bedford to mark 25 years' service by Mr Lennox-Boyd, the Colonial Secretary, as MP for Mid-Bedfordshire. The speech noted the strength of the British economy at this time.

⁸ The Suez crisis of 1957 occurred when the Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal was announced by Egyptian President Colonel Nasser, which resulted in military action against Egypt by Britain, France and Israel.

⁹ In the British pantomime, fairytales and folk legends for children such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Aladdin, and Jack and the Beanstalk are reworked. Building on the Italian tradition of *Commedia dell'Arte* of a troupe of wandering players presenting a tale with a moral, the pantomime grew to encompass singing, dancing, slapstick, cross-dressing, and audience participation. Middle aged men would take the role of 'dame' (a grotesque and exaggerated parody of an assertive older woman whilst the principal boy (supposedly the handsome leading man) would be played by a glamorous young woman. Popular personalities from the world of theatre and radio then television would star, and the scripts would include topical jokes and references. The target audience is a family one and the pantomime is performed at Christmas, although the festival itself is not the subject nor is it mentioned. The cast of *The Rag Trade* such as Varney and Karlin regularly appeared in pantomime.

¹⁰ Comedy writer Carla Lane is the perhaps the only exception to this observation. Lane's *The Liver Birds* (BBC 1969-1978) featured two young, independent women flat-sharing in Liverpool whose comic exploits at home and work did manifest in gentle, knockabout comedy. Lane did however move on to less physical and more reflective work in subsequent comedies such as *Butterflies* (1978-1983), which tackles a middle-class wife and mother dealing with her dissatisfaction at how her life has turned out; and *Solo* (BBC 1981-2), whose lead character decides to end her relationship and leave her job after her partner is unfaithful.