

## Dinner is served - dinnerladies

Contributed by Chrissie Gold

A look at Victoria Wood's quirky comedy, dinnerladies.

I recently attended a web writing workshop for professional writers and one of the exercises was to imagine your website was a dinner guest. You know, consider things such as... what kind of person is your website? What are their good points? What are their negative qualities? It was getting close to lunch and my mind started to wander. So I also asked myself 'what is being served at the dinner?' and 'what are the people like who are serving?'

My mind wandered even further to my great passion, British comedy, in particular the wonderfully understated sitcom, dinnerladies. dinnerladies (yes, lower case) was written by Victoria Wood, and starred regular members of her comedy ensemble, Celia Imrie, Duncan Preston and Julie Walters. It's a sitcom about caterers who work in a factory canteen in Manchester, England.

Victoria Wood is a fine observer of people, and she doesn't bother using oven gloves with this set of characters. They are honest and real, but flawed. And as in all my favourite comedies, dinnerladies is served with a fair amount of sauce.

The main character is Bren (Victoria Wood), the chief cook. She's the unwanted daughter of Petula Gordino (Julie Walters) who lives on the streets, but in a fantasy world. The kitchen hands are Dolly (Thelma Barlow), Jean (Anne Reid), Twinkle (Maxine Peake) and Anita (Shobna Gulati). Tony (Andrew Dunn) manages the canteen, Stan (Duncan Preston) maintains it and Philippa (Celia Imrie) takes care of human resources.

Wood's comedy creation is garnished with anarchy, emotion and absurdity, and her characters are both sweet and spicy.

The spiciest is Petula. She's homeless. She scrounges her food, drink and drugs, and imagines a life mixing with celebrities. She believes she's an ageless goddess with a string of lovers. She has no mothering skills and she is selfish and smelly. We should hate her, but we don't. Thanks to Julie Walters' flawless performance, we love her.

Bren is street-smart, witty, soft-hearted and assertive, but she lacks self-confidence and has low self-esteem. Wood plays her brilliantly, although occasionally she breaks into a stand-up style of dialogue, which at times sounds unnatural.

Bren's love interest is Tony. He may work with a bunch of women, but he's still a man's man. Any talk of PMS, childbirth or menopause and he's off outside for a cigarette. His major weakness is physical. He's recovering from cancer which threatens his performance in bed.

The other characters are also quirky, but still real. Twinkle is an enigmatic character. She's hard but sympathetic. She's cheeky but fiercely loyal. She knows where to obtain drugs but she's got a compassionate side &mdash; at home, she cares for her disabled mother. Anita is sweet and broody, and has an IQ not much higher than her age. Dolly is an old-fashioned, snooty prude. She obtains all her worldly wisdom from the Daily Mail. Jean's husband ran off to Wales with a dental hygienist and she takes it out on everybody around her &mdash; until she finds love again. Norman the breadman is agoraphobic and his sidekick Glenda suffers from the after effects of surgery to correct 'a bit hanging down'. Both of them are miserable characters.

Like all good British sitcoms, catchphrases and in-jokes fill the show. No one character can be singled out for having the best lines, and Victoria Wood deserves the kudos for being responsible for all of them. dinnerladies is full of catchy quotes. There's Twinkle's 'Ha ha Alan Partridge/League of Gentlemen/Hale and Pace/Benny Hill/straight to video' (or whatever), Stan's 'My dad was a Desert Rat' and Norman's 'I fell off a diving board in Guernsey'. Catch-phrase humour might be predictable, but the anticipation of a gag is wonderful.

dinnerladies isn't afraid to exhibit emotion; sometimes strong and heart-wrenching. The show has a tragic side, with Tony's cancer, Anita's baby, Jean's marriage break up and Bren's savagely mixed feelings in dealing with her mother. The mundane, boring sameness of life in a factory canteen combined with true-to-life daily problems are not covered up by Wood's comedy script.

But it doesn't take long for Wood to bring the action and dialogue up again. One thing I like about British sitcoms, including dinnerladies, is that sentimentality doesn't linger for too long, unlike their American counterparts. The atmosphere of the canteen might seem jolly; the banter happy and witty but canteen shutters go up at the same time each day; tea trolleys are prepared; 15 rounds of toast are ordered each breakfast; bread is buttered for sandwiches; and daily deliveries are as regular as clockwork. To emphasise this, or perhaps to save money on the production, the entire series is set in either the kitchen or dining room. Each episode was recorded in front of a studio audience, not once, but twice. This meant that changes could be made the next night and if retakes were necessary, the audience laughter was fresh.

Unlike M\*A\*S\*H, Happy Days, Red Dwarf, and so many other sitcoms, dinnerladies stopped before 'jumping the shark' syndrome set in. It ran for just two series. dinnerladies was produced by Victoria Wood and Geoff Posner, who also directed the show.

If you want a comedy show that could have ended up naff or twee but didn't, I recommend dinnerladies. It would make a far better self-catering dinner guest than my work's website.

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