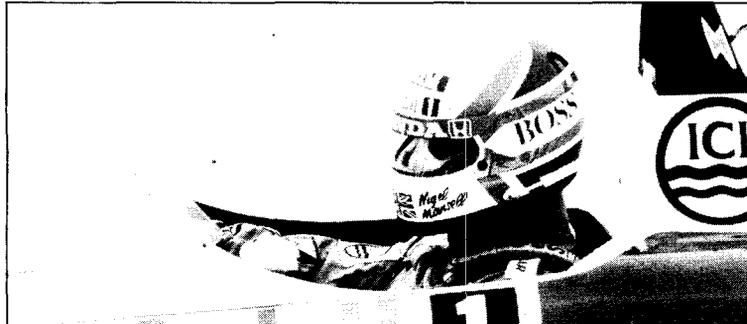


A Successful Formula



Nigel Mansell: An unlikely hero who confounded the sceptics

Grand prix driver Nigel Mansell is an unlikely motor racing champion. He neither looks nor sounds the part. His Brummie monotone belongs more to the Lucas Aerospace works where he was once an engineer, while his habit of bringing his wife and children to races doesn't fit the image of fast-living, jet-setting grand prix ace. Besides, Mansell, 32, shouldn't logically be champion. As number two driver in the Williams' grand prix team to Brazilian star Nelson Piquet, Mansell should be playing a supporting role – not regularly beating his higher-paid team mate.

Yet, that is precisely what Mansell has done this year – taking him within a gear-change of the world championship. With five victories under his belt at the time of going to press, Mansell had only to win one more race to be assured the title; a prospect which confounded the sceptics who have doubted his ability.

For Mansell has never been credited with the natural talent of former British world champions Jim Clark (his own hero) and Jackie Stewart – or even his own rivals for the title – Alain Prost, Ayrton Senna and Nelson Piquet. Rather, Mansell is seen as a gutsy trier – who in the past invariably tried too hard and ended up in the crash barriers. He has none of the financial advantages of some of his colleagues, financing his early racing by washing windows, while his wife Rosanne demonstrated gas cookers. He eventually sold everything to get into For-

mula 3 – the proving ground for aspiring grand prix stars. Once there, he didn't dominate the scene, like many of his current rivals such as Piquet – but instead performed well in uncompetitive cars.

By then he had broken his neck and badly injured his back in racing accidents. But his biggest break came when talent spotter Colin Chapman, the boss of Lotus cars offered him a formula one drive. Despite a good rapport with Chapman, errors outnumbered results, and after Chapman's death in 1982, Mansell's career nose-dived. 'When I was with Colin,' he says, 'things were very good but when he died, things changed. Colin handled many sections of the business himself – he could do it, because he had the power and charisma and the final say. But when he died, Lotus floundered for a couple of years.'

By good fortune, Mansell was offered the number two seat at Williams – a team which had itself been struggling with the advent of turbo-charged engines. Still, Mansell was noted more for his gaffes than his gifts – particularly by spinning off in front of the tv cameras while leading the Monaco Grand Prix. At the end of the 1984 season, the McLaren team had presented a comic video of Mansell's accidents and excuses at a victory celebration; and when it was announced that Mansell was to be his team mate, Williams' driver Keke Rosberg threatened to quit. 'The human being I can get along

with,' said the former world champion. 'The professional person I'm not so sure about'.

However, as Williams' design director Patrick Head points out, Williams was in the throes of adapting to turbo-engine technology, and badly needed a driver with turbo experience – which Mansell had with Lotus. 'I thought he was a driver very committed to working hard.'

Head's faith was rewarded – by the end of 1985 Mansell was winning at last, and his form continued spectacularly into 1986. Everyone agrees that Mansell is a changed man this year – success has brought a new confidence and image consciousness. He suffers fools politely, if not gladly, interviews are restricted to five minutes, he deftly switches caps mid-interview to please the sponsors, and he slips into a bizarre third person PR speak when talking about himself.

Who can blame him for playing the part? Ferrari has already offered him an alleged £1.5M to drive its cars next year, and McLaren, the team that two years ago made him the office party joke, has also been on the phone. Mansell has now resigned with Williams, for a rumoured £2m for two years.

Many paddock pundits argue that Mansell has simply been lucky to be in the right team – and car – at the right time. Mansell has always paid tribute to teamwork in an era of eight second stops for tyre changes, but insists: 'The driver's still got to do the job, he's still got to go out and win the race. The tyres stops are critical, because you can screw up during tyre stops, but it just involves the team a little bit more than they were before.' In answer to his critics, Mansell has made few mistakes this year – even under extreme pressure. In fact, it is star driver Piquet who has goofed more regularly than his number two. Success has, undoubtedly, changed him. It has made him hungry for more ●

Nick Newman

The Spice of Life

A new series of six half-hour comedy programmes *Victoria Wood as seen on TV* starts this month. Michlene Wandour spoke to its originator, writer and performer, Victoria Wood, in rehearsals.

Can we start at the beginning. Born . . .

Born Prestwich near Manchester, 1953. Grammar school, university. Television. Before I graduated from university I was a barmaid in a pub in Birmingham, and met someone who worked at the BBC who heard me playing the piano, and asked me to audition at Pebble Mill, which I did. I got a few odd little jobs singing songs on their regional programme on Friday nights. The first programme was a folk programme and I sang on that. Then they asked me to write songs specially for some of their other programmes. So by the time I left I already had an Equity card. You can't get them now for just being on the BBC, but you could at that time.

You write and perform your own material. Have you done other people's stuff?

At university I was in lots of plays. But I've never wanted to really. It's just the way it's gone. I've always been writing something and then gone on to do it or getting it done. I'm not an actress, so I don't go round scouting for other people's things to do.

I would do something if I thought it was a great script. I'd do a part in a film or something if anybody asked me. I've just been offered a little part. I can't do it because I'm busy with this.

When did you get married?

1980. We met in a play at Leicester. In 1976. Geoff was an actor then, he was in the show at the Leicester Phoenix playing Buffalo Bill. I was very out of work and they needed somebody to play the piano for the show for two weeks. A bit after that he decided to stop being an actor. And became a magician instead.

Have you done shows together?

We haven't done since 1982, when we went to Ostend with a show there. We thought it was time I should do a full-length show on my own and he should skip off and do television.

Do you watch each other's stuff?

The way it's worked out the last couple of years we haven't always been able to. I can always get to see him in pantomime, because it's 12 weeks at a time.

Are you going to have any children?

I don't know, things are so rushed at the moment, there's no way we could. I haven't been at home since July and I won't be home until November.

Where's home?

Near Lancaster. Geoff's been on tour at least twice this year, he's just got back from Kenya. And he'll be in pantomime over Christmas. It's all very disjointed, there's not much home life.

What are the questions you get asked most often in interviews?

Why aren't there more female comediennees?

Do you want me to ask that?

No, because I don't know the answer.

You get comedy formats, don't you, like *Three of a Kind*. There you have three or four blokes and one woman.

Yes. But they're written by men, so it's a natural progression. I write my show, and we've got three or four women and only one regular man. I bring men in to play businessmen, so I'm just the same. It's just natural that you tend to write for women.

Based on your own gender and your own interests?

Yes. And men do that too, there's no reason to criticise them.

What do you like doing best?

I think stand up comedy is what I prefer in theatre. And I love doing this whole show, because I like the feeling that I've written six episodes.

Do you take a central part in deciding how it is structured?

Are you producing in a sense?

No, I'm not producing in that way. I think of six running orders and I'll give them to the producer, and he'll probably say: 'We can't put those

two together, or in two separate sketches because they've got the same person in them, and they have to be paid twice'. Something like that. There are things that he knows about that I don't. As long as you say there's a film in each, a song in each, a short sketch then a big sketch, it's fairly easy to do. There's so much stuff and it's quite varied.

So, you've got a quite unusual degree of control over what you do and how you do it?

Yes.

Writing, performing, being part of the structure, casting. And directing and interpretation in a sense.

Yes. Intonations and things like that. Most people get it right first off. Geoff Posner is an absolutely great director. I don't interfere with him. I mean, we work together. So, if somebody misses the gist, I'd say, try it the other way. I'm always around.

Are you there for the editing?

No. I think that's a very specialised job, and I wouldn't have anything to contribute.

Have you worked very much with the other so-called alternative comics?

No. I only work with my own chaps.

Have you wanted to?

No. I think they're all very much a group. I don't want to be part of anybody's group really. What I found about them is they all seem to have the same line on things. Whoever's name goes up at the end for the writing, I find it could have been any of them. They've got a joint sense of humour. There's eight people, with one enormous sense of humour between them. I think that's a pity. Everybody's individual.

But do you think there is a shared climate between the sorts of things you do and the things they've done? Is there something anarchic about both?

I don't know, really. They're younger than I am, most of them. About four years, I suppose. I don't feel any more connection with them than I do with Monty Python, even though I like them both. I just feel I'm following a theatrical tradition.

Which is linked to what?



Victoria Wood: 'I don't want to be part of anybody's group'

To variety. They're the roots that I recognise. It's not from my own childhood, I didn't have a particularly theatrical background. And I'm not sentimental - about the good old days or anything. But you do feel, when you walk on a stage, whether it's a new theatre or an old variety theatre, that you are following the footsteps of anybody who has ever walked out there and tried to entertain people. What's nice is that it's an old tradition, but it happens that minute that you do it.

I haven't asked you anything about feminism.

No, that's very good.

What do you think of feminism?

I don't know what people mean by it. I'm all for it, as long as it makes people more cheerful. Not miserable, and worrying about hairs on their legs. I don't like anything that tells people what to do.

What about marxism then?

I don't know anything about marxism.

What does it conjure up?

I think it conjures up miser-

able people shouting at me. **So politics is a lot of miserable people, standing shouting at you, telling you what you can't do.**

Yes!

I wonder where that comes from. Who shouted at you in your childhood?

No one. It must be from things I've read. I can't bear people discussing things, really. I can't stand it.

Why?

I think it serves no purpose, and it never makes me very happy. Thrashing things out.

Do you prefer just to get on and do something?

Yes. I like to think inside my own brain, I don't want to know what other people's brains are doing. I like to think about something and do it. And if others don't like it, sod it.

What if there's something you're curious about?

Issues, you mean?

No, anything.

I don't have a lot of natural curiosity, just about people.

About what they do and why they do it?

What they do. I don't think I ever know why people do things. I just like to know what they do. I love watching other people. It's a story unfolding. I might write down something people said, and never use it. It just sets you off. I think people are very underrated by writers. Ordinary people. People on the whole express themselves very well, and they don't have the limited vocabulary that most writers give them credit for.

Do you think that political people don't give ordinary people enough credit?

I don't know. I can't understand anybody wanting to go into politics. Local politics, I can understand a bit, because it's to do with normal things. But I can't understand anybody wanting to go into parliament. I think they must be barmy.

Do you think it's anything to do with them wanting power?

Yes. And a certain kind of life as well. I think it's awful that people are making decisions who don't have any home life, never watch television, never go for a walk, and live on black coffee. I think it's all slightly deranged.

Are there any new characters in your new show?

Yes. Kelly Marie Tunstall. She wears fish-net tights, and shirts shorter than her jackets. She stands at the bus stop talking. That's my new person. That's me, and I have a side kick called Mary.

Is this the first time we've seen your legs?

Yes. Shocked the cameramen. They were taken aback by them.

What shoes are you wearing?

High heels, very, as high as I can manage. It's all right because I just stand there, I don't have to walk about. Made me walk like Barbara Windsor, which made me laugh.

And after the tv shows?

I'd like to do a film. I've got a few things at the back of my mind. But I'm not really thinking about anything except this series. Then I'll have a bit of a rest. I can't do any big jobs, I'm too tired. I've been working non-stop since January, I need a holiday, a break. ●



Pat Phoenix: Flamboyant effect

Going Out In Style

From the announcement of lung cancer, until her funeral a month later, actress Pat Phoenix was seldom out of the tabloid headlines. But the intensity of the late summer press coverage and the enormous public interest it generated cannot be explained only in terms of cynical exploitation and ghoulish voyeurism – though those elements were present, particularly in the *Sun* and *The News of the World* with their tacky 'open letters' and 'deathbed' pictures.

For a start, Pat Phoenix herself, despite her increasing debilitation, was no passive

victim of media manipulation. In a sense, she 'produced' her own dying in as stylish and courageous a fashion as anyone in her situation could muster. From the press conference dressed up to the nines – 'tra-ra loves' – to the last rites, followed immediately by the wedding – 'hurry up, I'm dying' – to the razzmatazz funeral with New Orleans jazz band and black gospel choir, and then being cremated to Christina Rossetti and Lionel Richie with the showbiz wake after: she planned it all for maximum flamboyant effect.

The press obituaries called her 'The People's Star'. The fans at the funeral described her as 'belonging to us' or 'like one of us'. In terms of the resources that provided private hospitalisation, daily

hairdresser and negligees, she clearly wasn't. But as someone widely known to have had a troubled life both as 'herself' and as the character, Elsie Tanner in *Coronation Street*, she was. And the identification was all the stronger because she came through, in both roles, as 'a fighter': resilient, optimistic, down-to-earth.

When she left *Coronation Street* in 1983 she said it was because she wasn't prepared to 'grow old gracefully', quietly gin-drinking at the Rover's. I think she perceived, correctly, that while her own character, and subsequently those of Bet, Rita, Audrey, had done much to promote the possibility of middle-aged women being both strong and sexy, you couldn't yet portray a 'disgraceful' old woman without making her ridiculous. You could still be powerful when old, but, minus the eroticism, the choice was meddlesome battle-axe (Ena Sharples) or genteel regality (Annie Walker). So Elsie retired with lover to Spain, leaving Pat Phoenix in a subsequent career of advertising, chat-shows and new drama roles, to resolve, on a theatrical fantasy level at least, and right up to her death, the real-life tension of being both OAP and sex-symbol.

Hence the manner of her dying appeared a 'fitting' final performance for her public. But given the lack of open discussion about death, there's a sense in which the stars always do our dying for us through media coverage. The widely-quoted announce ment that Pat Phoenix died with dignity, pain-free and not alone spoke directly to the strongest private fears about our own deaths and offered consolations similar to those other recent deaths from cancer of Diana Dors and Noele Gordon. Having 'a good death', 'a magnificent send-off', 'going out in style' may reflect the sort of idealism that has nothing to say to the materialist belief that there's no heaven and all flesh is grass, but it still holds more powerful appeal ●

Rosalind Brunt