

Recreating Classic Sitcom Performances:

An Interview with Kevin McNally

Actor Kevin McNally has had the unusual experience of recreating the performances of not one but two famous comedy actors, having played Tony Hancock on radio in *The Missing Hancocks* (Radio 4, 2014-2020), and on television for the *Lost Sitcoms* entry ‘The New Neighbour’ (BBC, 2016), in addition to essaying Arthur Lowe’s Captain Mainwaring in *Dad’s Army: The Lost Episodes* (Gold, 2019). Talking to the author via Zoom on 18 May 2021, he discussed the challenges not only of playing a character made famous by another performer, but of making his performance faithful to the original without it becoming, to use the actor’s words, a ‘slavish imitation’. The resulting interview has been edited for publication, with the kind approval of Mr McNally.

RH: When it comes to these roles, are you playing Tony Hancock the performer, who is in turn playing the fictional character Anthony Aloysius St John Hancock? Or is Kevin McNally the actor playing Captain Mainwaring the character, while trying to recreate aspects of Arthur Lowe the original performer?

KM: It's a very interesting hybrid, and if I can approach it, first of all, from what an actor normally does, an actor normally collects his source material: the script, character research – if it's a real person, you know, try to find online what they look like, to see what their mannerisms are – and then you take it forward into what we call our performance. The difference with Hancock and Mainwaring was, there was already a goal to achieve, up ahead. So it wasn't like I was heading out in some direction and interestingly see what I come up with; there was this finish line that I needed to get to. And it is an interesting hybrid because you are playing the person playing Captain Mainwaring, or you are playing the man playing

Anthony Aloysius Hancock, and I always use the phrase that what you want to get towards is something just shy of a slavish impression. Because you have to retain the wiggle room, in performance, that allows you to work with other people who perhaps aren't being as precise, whether through choice or through an inability to be that precise, and you have to respond to the material. So the truth is, by the time I got to play Hancock on the radio,¹ I was slightly more energetic than he is – slightly faster than he is – but that's more to do with changing styles and tastes. I know that Neil Pearson, who put the whole Hancock thing together, reminded me very early on at the beginning not to be afraid of the tropes. You know [adopting the Hancock voice], not to be afraid of the various things that Hancock would do and the way he would speak, because they were needed – because they would counterbalance any Kevin that came out. The same was very true for Mainwaring [adopting the Mainwaring voice], playing the very distinctive voice that he had, you know, you couldn't do it without that it; would be an insult. And I also had to constantly remember that the brief is to fill the gaps in the BBC's archive, so you are doing the work in the context of it being service to the original material. It's not a reinvention like, say, the *Dad's Army* movie (Parker, 2016) was,² and in fact because of that, and my respect for that particular niche that I seem to have cornered somewhat, I absolutely would not do anything not written by either David Croft and Jimmy Perry³ or Ray Galton and Alan Simpson.⁴ And I normally wouldn't do anything that you could hear the original person do, but I made one small exception to that when the RAF hundredth anniversary came up – and my dad was in the RAF – and they asked me to do the famous test pilot sketch at the Royal Albert Hall, and it was just too interesting a thing not to do. So I have, in front of about 3000 people, done the same material that they can hear Tony Hancock doing – which was dangerous.

RH: Was that with Robin Sebastian as Kenneth Williams?⁵

KM: Robin Sebastian played Kenneth Williams, yeah.

RH: I read a about that in Freddie Hancock and David Nathan's biography (1986, p. 180), and apparently after he'd left the BBC Hancock frantically phoned Kenneth Williams up on a Carry On set, saying 'I need you, I've got to fill some stage time. Will you come and do the RAF sketch with me again?' And Williams said, 'Well, no, I don't see how something that's essentially an audio phenomenon would work as a stage performance,' and turned him down flat. Plus he felt that he'd been used by Hancock, and didn't want to go back to that.

RH: Yeah, you're absolutely right, and of course Kenneth Williams was a man to harbour a grudge in a way that Sid James⁶ wasn't, so yes, he didn't do that, and he didn't help him out. And it's rather a shame, although I think by that point Hancock was rather beyond help. I must tell you a funny story, actually, about the research for Hancock. We got a script, I think in the second season, called 'Hancock in Russia', and it's about them taking a production of *Hamlet* to Moscow. And in it, Hancock gets drunk. And of course, I knew what Hancock was like drunk, because you can see it in a number of his interviews. But I had no idea how Hancock would act drunk.

RH: As the character?

KM: In a comic way, yeah. And so I searched and I searched and I searched, and I think Galton and Simpson felt a bit uncomfortable writing Hancock drunk, so they only did it once, and then they thought, 'Well, actually, that's a bit near the knuckle. Actually, we don't want to encourage him.' And then I found that he had played *The Government Inspector* by Gogol on the BBC (1958). And I knew there's an amazing scene in that, where the government inspector gets increasingly drunk, and it's a very, very comic scene. And indeed, I found a copy of it at the BBC, and watched it, and there it was: Hancock's drunk acting – completely

different from Hancock drunk. It wasn't slurred; it was an energetic, lovely sort of celebration of bacchanalian fun.

RH: The Russian episode is the only one where you've got the characters actually performing as comedians.

KM: That's right, yes.

RH: And it's going horribly badly, but they're doing the crosstalk and everything. And they are quite energetic – and of course, they're drunk as well. So it's very interesting to hear them doing that, rather than remaining in character, arguing in the house or whatever; it's quite strange.

KM: Well, you know, what is an extra facet of Hancock as opposed to Captain Mainwaring is that actually Hancock is playing Anthony Aloysius Hancock, who is often playing other roles. But he's playing a sort of a stylized version of himself, which, in the early episodes that are missing, very often he's a very different character, because obviously, as time went on, Galton and Simpson included more of the Hancock they got to know in the character. So there were some episodes early on which were interesting to play, but I was much keener on the later episodes, when it was the Hancock that I knew. For instance, the first one was the Staffordshire Hancock Festival, when he writes the short stories and does them. So there he was definitely playing three very different characters. He was being Paul Gauguin, and then a sort of a gambling fanatic, and then Carruthers, the garrison officer in 'The Outpost'. So each of them presented a very different sort of set of problems.

The other interesting thing was, that when they came to me about Hancock – he was absolutely my hero; I mean, I just loved him from when I was a kid – and the funny thing was, Neil told me that he had put this idea to the BBC, and they said, 'Yes, of course, but

you've got to have a really good Hancock'. And he thought, 'Well, this is going to be a search for about three months', and he went to a party that night, and met Andy Hamilton, mentioned his dilemma and Andy Hamilton said, 'Your search is over; it's Kevin McNally. It's hard to stop him doing Hancock, even when he's playing psychopaths.' So I knew I had a Hancock in me. When they came to me about Mainwaring I had never for a moment considered that, and in fact I very nearly turned it down. But then I thought, 'Well, wait a minute. If I understand the process, surely I can build that performance. It doesn't have to be something I've been doing in the playground all my life.' Do you know what I mean? I can, I can apply my actor's intellect, as a performer, and my craft, and build that performance. So I learned a lot more about it doing Mainwaring than I did necessarily doing Hancock, because Hancock was quite an instinctual thing for me.

RH: Did that mean that you felt under more pressure personally, because as a Hancock fan, you think 'I've got to get him right, because I love him'?

KM: Yeah.

RH: And with Mainwaring, 'This is a challenge that I want to get right.'

KM: Yes, very much that. Although I have to say there was an apprehension that, you know, your generation weren't around for Hancock, but you were all kids when *Dad's Army* (BBC, 1968-1977) was around, and there is such a love for that programme – I don't think it's ever not been shown on television – that the sense of responsibility was huge; absolutely huge. And a very interesting thing happened on the recording of it. We had a lot of the catchphrases in there, and I got permission to put a couple of Mainwaring's catchphrases in that weren't in the script, like 'Stupid boy'. The audience were quite apprehensive for the first few minutes, and then I think it was when Kevin Eldon⁷ said 'They don't like it up them...'

RH: 'They do not like it up them' – and you can hear that the audience sort of erupts and there's a wave of satisfaction and relief.

KM: It was incredible. So much so that they were laughing a hell of a lot and it was slowing the show down. And, stupidly, somebody came down and said, 'Look, you know, we know that you love this show, But can we not have such hysterical response?' – at which point they were completely quiet.

RH: Oh, dear!

KM: And I was looking at Kevin Eldon, and going 'Oh, shit'. So I eventually went over in character to the audience and got very close to them and said [adopting Mainwaring voice]: 'You know that stupid man that came down here? Just ignore everything that he said, would you, and laugh as much as you bloody well like.' And then it was relaxed, and then it was okay from then on. Certainly I understood why they did that, but it goes to show what an interesting, layered experience it is.

RH: Yes.

KM: You know, they're laughing at us as we recreate something that then reminds them of something that they loved.

RH: Listening to the Hancocks, whenever Robin Sebastian 'does' Kenneth Williams and the 'snide' voice - 'Stop mucking about!' - there is again this huge wave of laughter. Now in itself, it could be because people like to recognise a catchphrase. It's reassuring, and it's this sort of way in, if you like, for the audience.

KM: Absolutely.

RH: But are they laughing because it's funny? Or are they laughing because they think that Robin Sebastian is sounding like Kenneth Williams, and they're remembering Kenneth Williams in their minds? Are they remembering the Carry On films, and that's what's making them laugh? He didn't do the 'snide' voice so much in the Carry Ons; that was really for the Hancocks.

KM: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think it's the latter. I mean, obviously, Robin is a fantastic impersonator of Kenneth Williams, and it's a much greater impersonation than my version of Hancock is. And I think it's to do with the fact that the catchphrase came about sixty years ago, because it was a funny line, delivered brilliantly funnily. So it has an innate value itself. But when somebody brings it alive again, I think it is that slight ricochet of recognition that makes the audience feel incredibly comfortable. We always felt when we did the Hancocks that just when I came on and went 'H-h-h-Hancock's Half Hour',⁸ that there was an immediate sense from the audience of 'Oh, this is going to be like a warm bath.' Do you know what I mean? It's great to have those. And similarly, in *Dad's Army*, when those catchphrases come up – I'm not particularly a fan of catchphrase comedy – but when they came up, it's an actual palpable feeling of warmth, love and affection that comes over the relationship between you and the audience.

RH: You've used the word 'recreate' in interviews when describing the experience of making both *The Missing Hancocks* (British Comedy Guide, 2014) and *Dad's Army – The Lost Episodes* (Gold, 2019). Given that the episodes you've recreated no longer exist in the archives, and you're working from the original script – not adapted versions like *Paul Merton in Galton and Simpson's* (ITV, 1996-1997), or the new *Dad's Army* movie – to what extent are you providing a version of what you think or imagine the original performances would have been? And did the same apply when you made *Hancock's Half Hour* 'The

Counterfeiter', which was written in the 1950s but never actually recorded? Because you're not recreating a performance there – you're giving a new, original performance of a script that was never performed, but in the style (I'm guessing) you imagine it would have been like.

KM: Yes. Oh, absolutely. There was a very simple process for this early on in the Hancocks, although I sort of dropped it later because I'd become so immersed in it. And it's certainly what I had to do with Mainwaring, in that I went through the scripts quite forensically and took each scene and felt where the character might be. And then I looked through the archives, and I tried to find scenes that were similar, in case I would find something surprising, certainly, that Mainwaring did. Because one of the problems is, you know, you tend to go [adopting Hancock voice], 'Oh, Tony Hancock's like this,' and Mainwaring was [adopting Mainwaring voice] sort of a patrician sort of chap. But of course, they had many more colours than that, and it was my job to find all of the colours, or as many of the colours I could find. If you look back at Mike Yarwood doing Hancock, it's just [adopting the Hancock voice] that's all he does, you know; that's the only thing he does, really. It's very good, it's recognisable, but, you know, it's for sketch comedy, so it's fine. But if you want to create a half an hour sitcom, you've really got to have variety, colour and – a word I use – all the tropes that they have. So the most extreme example of that was finding Hancock acting drunk, you know?

RH: Yes.

KM: And so, for Mainwaring for instance, I had a phone call with the wife, so I looked at as many scenes as I could find when he spoke to his wife, with that quite nervous sort of manner. In fact, the very first scene I shot I improvised a line, and I was sort of testing the waters, really, with the Croft and Perry estate, to see if I could make little changes. It was when Robert Bathurst⁹ woke me up in an air raid shelter; there's an air raid in London as we

go up to try to get Walker relieved from active service, and he wakes me up. And it was a bit of a dull moment, and I just went [adopting Mainwaring voice], ‘Oh, what is it now, Elizabeth?’ And they actually loved it and they kept it in. So I think they started to trust my sense of taste.

RH: So that’s Kevin McNally, the actor, adding something that he thinks Arthur Lowe, the performer, might have done in character?

RH: Yes, exactly that.

RH: There's another bit in *Hancock's Half Hour*, where Hancock delivers the line, ‘She saw my face in a magazine; it was a horror mag,’ and it gets a small laugh. And you, Kevin McNally, then say the line again, more forcefully. The audience laugh more, and you say, ‘Better!’ And that, for me, is where you're doing what I imagine you think Hancock would have done in that situation, and you feel comfortable enough in the role to do that.

KM: Yeah.

RH: I’m guessing that wasn't scripted; that’s you thinking, ‘I can make this laugh bigger.’

KM: Oh, yeah. Actually, I’d completely forgotten that; I’ll have to look that up again. You know, I’ll tell you exactly where that came from – and that's a really interesting aspect of what we do. You know, there's a lot of swearing and stuff goes on, and I don't think that the original cast would have done that. So we were aware as a team that we should probably keep our own characters quite quiet, and if we did interrelate with the audience, maybe do it a little bit like Arthur Lowe or a little bit like John Le Mesurier would have done. Certainly, doing the *Hancock's Half Hour*, one of the things about it was that we wanted to recreate as much as possible the sensation of what it would have been like to have gone to a recording studio and watched an original *Hancock's Half Hour* being recorded. So I, personally, and Robin

Sebastian, particularly, tended to stay in character, even when we weren't on script. And that sort of led to an ability to do things like that, because you know that Hancock would have done that; you can be absolutely sure that he would have done that. And I only got away with it, really, because there were moments when I was in my research when you hear Hancock having a little bit of an interrelationship with the audience, and I think I even remembered at one point him showing some disappointment at a response to a joke. So it was certainly in the bubble of things that have occurred, you know. What you don't want to do is do something that would take the audience out of the experience you are trying to create, because that would be counterproductive for yourself.

RH: In a way the audience is part of the performance, and doing that will break a sort of fourth wall.

KM: Oh, utterly, utterly. And, you know, as Neil Pearson used to say when we were doing the radio versions, the entire audience was made up of the paramilitary wing of the Hancock Appreciation Society. You know, these are hard-line military supporters. And the same was true for *Dad's Army*; you know, those people who turned up to Pinewood.¹⁰ And I imagine what they do is they reached out to a number of societies that are the fans of *Dad's Army*, and you want those people in in their great numbers. They're the same people who they brought in for *The One Show* (BBC, 2006-);¹¹ you know, these wonderful people who do weekends and recreate them, and they've got Jones's lorry, you know, they have a version of that. So I would say they are ten per cent of the experience, when you're recreating something like that. The one thing I would like to say about the two projects – because I was thinking about what else could I do like that – there's a major problem when you move on from Galton and Simpson, and Croft and Perry, in that – almost uniquely – there is virtually nothing you need to take out of it for a modern audience. I mean, I could I do a very good Jack Smethurst, but

can you imagine trying to do *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV, 1972-1976) again? Or *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1965-1975), even? You know, *Mind Your Language* (ITV, 1977-1979)...

These comedy shows, they're unrepeatable and undoable nowadays.

RH: I show students a segment from the live *Hancock's Half Hour* episode, 'How to Win Money and Influence People', where he has a scene by a letterbox with Dick Emery as a postman who is refusing to collect Hancock's wheelbarrow-full of competition entries unless he actually posts them through the slot. Emery fluffs his line about Hancock preventing him from doing his duty. Hancock is trying not to corpse, and says, 'Whatever you just said, I'm not!' And I ask the students: 'What is happening here that's different from sitcoms today?' And they say, 'Oh, he's breaking the fourth wall.' No, he's not! It's going wrong, because it's live. It's not deliberate – but that's what sitcom was back then.

KM: That's right. You should show them the other scene with Dick Emery, when the set falls apart. It's an episode called 'There's an Airfield at the Bottom of My Garden', and he's trying to sell this house to Dick Emery. And the set's been built to fall apart, but it all falls apart at the wrong time. And Hancock is basically holding a table up, waiting for the house to fall.

RH: Yes, I think that's in the biography.

KM: You know, there's a wonderful thing that I remember – this was partly what inspired me to be able to respect and go to the audience – is that there was there was one scene where, I don't know, I can't remember whether he got too much of a laugh, and he actually looks at the audience and goes: 'Please, let the artist perform!' And this went out live on television. I mean, I suppose it comes from years and years of stage work.

RH: Yes.

KM: You know, we forget that that generation – most of them started in ENSA, of course, and most of them played the Windmill – played to audiences that didn't want to listen to them, and weren't laughing, so that they really were what I call the tough guys of comedies; you could not break them.

RH: It's interesting that that's the same generation as an act like Morecambe and Wise, who don't go into sitcom – although you could say the bedroom stuff is slightly sitcom – but continue down the variety route. But at that point in the 1950s, the rules of television sitcom have not been fixed; it's not set in stone. Audiences are used to variety, and stand-up; the sitcom begins as an extension of the sketch. So it wouldn't have been that disjunctive or odd, I think, at the time – whereas now, if Lee Mack did that midway through an episode of *Not Going Out* (BBC, 2006-), it would just break the realism.

KM: No, absolutely. But I think you're right; it was a crucible of the beginning of sitcom. I personally think it came about because Hancock was not a joke teller. I think Galton and Simpson realised that he was funny in the long form, and when he did his performances he always played characters. He was an early character comedian, but certainly I don't think he was able to tell jokes. In fact, I think I've read somewhere that Hancock, famously, if he did have a few drinks and tried to tell a joke, people would say, 'Look, you're not funny Tony; stop it. Stop trying to tell jokes.' And so one of the reasons why the breakup, or his abandonment of Galton and Simpson – and I actually had the great fortune to talk to them about this before they both passed, sadly – was that there really wasn't a Hancock without Galton and Simpson. I mean, you can argue that, you know, he'd already gained some fame with Peter Brough and Archie Andrews in *Educating Archie* (BBC, 1950-1960), but it was a very minor kind and, you know, there's 'Flipping kids!' and all that.¹² And I listen to it now, and it's not the Hancock I know; it's not the Hancock that Galton and Simpson created.

RH: They gave him the voice. When he leaves them, you can see in the later stuff, it's still the same character, but just not being written for as well; not being accommodated.

KM: Yes.

RH: I've seen a clip of the Australian show;¹³ the one he didn't finish.

KM: Awful.

RH: In the first episode he's on the boat going across, delivering the kind of lines that, you know, Galton and Simpson could have written better, and it's just a pale imitation.

KM: Oh, it's horrible. It's just not funny. The thing that happened to Hancock, he was physically very agile, he was facially very agile, and he was vocally very agile. And as the drink sort of started to calcify him, he lost all of that. It's particularly evident in the Australian stuff that there's sort of nothing going on there. And it's starting to become evident in the ATV programme.¹⁴ And, you know, one of the great things, just to come around to why I love what happened to me doing this, is I had for years been trying to do a film about Tony Hancock. And it was only when this came up, I realised, 'No, I don't want to celebrate, you know, the tears behind the clown and what a pathetic drunk he was. I want to celebrate the brilliance of Hancock, which is his performance.' So I'm so pleased that that didn't happen, and this happened instead.

RH: I was about to ask whether you would be interested, having done those, in a biopic type thing?

KM: No, I tried for ten years, but I wouldn't in the slightest be interested in doing that now. Full of clichés.

RH: Yes.

KM: I mean, you look at something like *In the Name of the Father* (Sheridan, 1993); you know, famously a complete fabrication. Why even say it's about the subject matter that it's about? It's not. I think biographers have this problem. I remember reading Albert Goldman's biography of Elvis Presley (1981), and you know, you have a whole chapter of him alone in a room, what he's doing, and you go, 'Well, wait a minute – what am I reading here? How am I reading about somebody alone in a room that's professing to be a biography?' It's sheer charlatanry, I think.

RH: You've used the words 'impersonation' and 'impression' to describe what we're talking about. With Mike Yarwood what you were saying was that it's an impression, which I think is taking one aspect of the person or the character and exaggerating it because people can recognise it. So you're talking about Mike Yarwood taking the vocal mannerism of Hancock, without creating the whole character. Whereas an impersonation, I feel, is what you are working towards with these performances, i.e. a more rounded character – but you don't want it to be a pure impersonation, because that would mean that you are not bringing anything to it yourself as an actor.

KM: That's right. Yes, absolutely. I would say, though, that the recreation of somebody playing a character is a mosaic of micro impressions. So, you know, moment to moment it will be singular, because you want it to be accurate, but what is required in this particular, peculiar genre that I found myself in is for you to provide a framework. It's a bit like film going through a camera. You know, it's like the way your eye provides a constant movement to a series of still images. The problem with the impersonation/impression is that people are savagely aware that you're not the person, and what I need to do is for them to completely forget that I'm not the real person. So that's one of the many objectives whenever I'm doing these things.

RH: To what extent are these performances inside-out? We've talked in the past about the Stanislavski approach – not necessarily Method, because that's an abstraction of Stanislavski – but drawing upon your experiences, imagination, and in this case your knowledge of Hancock, to create a character. Also, to what extent are they outside-in – and they're not a binary, I would say – but finding a character through externals such as voice or costume? You shaved your head to play Captain Mainwaring, and you say on *The One Show* it was because there was no budget for a bald cap. But would you, as an actor, do a Robert De Niro and deliberately put on weight to play a character that is physically larger than you?¹⁵ Were you shaving your head to feel more like Arthur Lowe in terms of your own physicality, or was it an attempt to look as much like him as possible in order to make your Captain Mainwaring authentic for the viewers, who of course know and love the character?

KM: Definitely the latter. You know, I wouldn't put on a load of weight. I wore padding for Captain Mainwaring.

RH: I was going to ask, because in one scene where Mainwaring and Wilson are shown in their pyjamas, I thought, 'He's wearing padding there; he must be.'

KM: Yeah, I know. It was a shame, really. A number of things happened; we made discoveries while we were doing it. I think we didn't know that that scene started with them in their pyjamas; I'm not sure. I know that we knew that they were going to be in their long johns, so it was rather revealing to my fat suit. But yes, as far as your question goes, inside-out/outside-in, I talk about this a lot with my acting students, and it is not binary, you're absolutely right. Outside-in lends itself more to what you do as a craftsperson, and inside-out is regarded more as what you do as an artist; as an actor. I don't think you can achieve the artistry without having spent a great deal of work on the craft. I always try to tell my students that the more work they do before they either get on stage or in front of the camera, the more

they can fly free of thinking about those things. So if I shave my head, I put on some padding and I do two weeks' work looking at old episodes of *Dad's Army*, and practice the voice and learn the lines really well, when I get in front of the audience I don't really have to think about those things anymore. You know, they're taken care of. And therefore I've muscle memoried Kevin into being like Arthur Lowe, and therefore I can perform as Kevin, if you see what I mean. Otherwise it would become what you talk about being an impression; I'd be going around trying to be like Arthur Lowe every second, and that creates a little barrier between you and the audience. And everything I feel you have to do as an actor is to make sure there's this there's fresh air, there's blue sky between you and the audience. So it's the answer to everything in my work. I think it's true of everybody; it's preparation.

RH: That's my understanding of Stanislavski. It's a while since I read him, but whether he's talking about drawing upon your imagination or your experience, it's the preparation that means it's as close to second nature as it can be when you're doing it, so you're not having to think about that and 'act'.

KM: Yeah, that's utterly Stanislavskian. And I don't think there are as many Method actors as people say there are. If you look at Al Pacino and Robert De Niro, famously, in the diner scene in *Heat* (Mann, 1995) – you know, two of the greatest screen actors ever. I actually was staying at a house where they had the script of *Heat*, and I read it and they are word for word what was written down, including the little changes they all agreed to make. People think that actors on film are improvisational. It's a possibility. You have to agree upon changes, for the editor, and for the person who's making the notes in the script. Jodie Foster said that in *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) she had that scene in the diner with De Niro. She said he took her out to a diner every day for three weeks and made her go through the scene with him until she was bored shitless with the scene, and that's exactly a demonstration of Stanislavskian

preparation, that it's so second nature – I think you used the word second nature, which is very good – it's so second nature to you, you don't have to think about it.

RH: You stated in one interview that you wanted to avoid the 'monotonous' and 'exasperated' vocal tone that impressionists often use for Hancock (British Comedy Guide, 2014). How fine a line do you have to tread between recreating specific aspects of the original actor's performing style, which is what James Naremore calls the actor's idiolect (1988, pp. 65-67), and interpreting the character as written? Naremore picked up on the fact that James Stewart, in the movies, whenever his character is frustrated or worried, gnaws his hand, whether he's playing Scotty in *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) or Jefferies in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954). They're very different characters, but that's what they both do.

KM: Oh, really?

RH: As Arthur Lowe, when he's exasperated, I noticed that you do this [exhales breath, as though expelling steam].

KM: Yes [also exhales, as Arthur Lowe]. That was a great moment of discovery for me, because it was like, 'How can I respond?'

RH: You are balancing between incorporating things that were natural to Arthur Lowe or Tony Hancock – and that goes back to the 'Better!' improvisation, when you're saying say the line again...

KM: Right.

RH: ... but also interpreting the character as written. Because at the very start of this interview you were talking about doing *Dad's Army*, and accommodating other actors' performances as well. And watching *Dad's Army* again today, and listening to the Hancocks,

I get the impression that, with some of the cast, they are doing what you are doing. They're trying to give as authentic a version of the actor playing the character as possible, in accordance with the original. Whereas with others – it may be a performance choice, or it may be because they just don't feel they can 'become' that actor – but when I'm listening to Simon Greenall as Sid James, I'm hearing him play Sid James, the Galton and Simpson character; I'm not hearing the Sid James of the Carry On films.

KM: Yes. No, absolutely. And it's really interesting that, because we've stuck with Simon because we think he does a wonderful version of that character. I don't know anybody who can do Sid James, actually.

RH: Everyone thinks they can; everyone can do an 'impression' of the laugh.

KM: That's right. But, as you know, on the television we had Jon Culshaw, and he did a pretty good job of it, but his voice was far too high. So at that point you think, 'Well, do you want a sort of a stage full of facsimiles?' Sid James is an interesting character. I don't think you could get away with not having Robin Sebastian do a very, very clear impression of Kenneth Williams, because it's so iconic. Simon says, 'If you ever find somebody who can do Sid James, I will gladly step back.' But we never did, and we never could.

RH: Watching *Dad's Army*, I felt that you and Kevin Eldon are doing as pitch perfect as possible versions of the actors playing the roles, but with Mathew Horne as Walker, while he's playing Walker, for me he's not playing James Beck.

KM: No, exactly.

RH: I don't feel James Beck there. And even, you know, Timothy West as Godfrey, he's not Arnold Ridley. For me he's similar, but he's giving his version.

KM: He's similar, similar. And similarly, our Frazer,¹⁶ I don't think he was interested in doing an impression of it, which is absolutely fine. I think that was, on his part, a question of taste, really. He didn't want to do all that [adopting John Laurie's voice] wide-eyed thing. You know, he didn't want to. So with all of them it was a conscious choice. And I think maybe with David Hayman, I think he thought, 'That sort of performance wouldn't work now, so I'm going to do a performance that would work now.' And on the whole, I think it was a good choice.

RH: He's not entirely dissimilar from John Laurie, but he is not John Laurie.

KM: Yeah, yeah.

RH: Whereas with Walker, I feel Horne is playing a character called Walker. I totally buy into this Walker, but I'm not being reminded in any way of what James Beck would have done when he was playing Walker.

KM: No. Although, obviously, I'm super critical of other actors, and I thought about all of them during the thing, and I think everyone did the absolute best they could do. Because how would you do an impression of James Beck?

RH: James Beck, as a performer in *Dad's Army*, always seems to me as if he is one step removed from it – as if he's aware he's in a farce. I never feel that Walker in the originals is actually experiencing all the mad stuff that's going on; it's as if he's playing it almost with a smile.

KM: Well, it's funny you should say that, because there was a scene when Mathew Horne got threatened by Frazer, and he looked scared. And I went up to him and I said, 'Don't take Frazer seriously; just laugh it off.' And he said, 'Yeah, that's the way it would work, wouldn't it?' Because you're absolutely right. I think you put your finger on what I saw he was doing

wrong – or going down a wrong route, not doing wrong – and so when he did it that way and was unaffected by Frazer it was much more believable, and it was closer to the original.

RH: You talked about doing the television *Hancock's Half Hour* episode 'The New Neighbour' for the *Lost Sitcoms* season. Apart from the fact that the script was originally reworked from radio for television anyway, what differences were there? Did you find yourself consciously adopting aspects of Hancock's physicality for the television version, because you knew you would be visible?

KM: Yes.

RH: Or do you find yourself doing that anyway when you're doing the radio shows because, as you said, you are in character as Hancock all the way through?

KM: Yes, absolutely – all the time, although I had to be more careful on television. I always wear the same shoes when I play Hancock; I wear a very, very loose pair of hushpuppies, just the way he did. And I always wear my dad's wristwatch that he gave me when he retired – sort of lucky totems. But also a very, very baggy suit I used to wear during the radio, because Hancock could never look tidy. However expensive his clothes, he always looked like a mess. So I did that. Plainly, you know, for the television I darkened my hair, I darkened my eyebrows; I developed a bit of a slouch. I made those extra few efforts. But certainly his rather loping, bouncy walk... there was just more focus on my physicality. I mean, in a sense, I should have put on a bit of weight, really, because there was a scene at the end saying, 'Look at the short fat bloke,' and I like to think that I don't look like a short fat bloke. But it was very interesting. I've been an amateur ventriloquist all my life, and being able to see Hancock being a ventriloquist, and he's 'doing' Peter Brough; that was a really interesting thing of me doing Hancock, playing Anthony Aloysius Hancock, 'doing' Peter Brough at the

end of it. I often say when I do these conventions about the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, and people ask me where I got my character from, I always say I'm doing an impression of Tony Hancock doing an impression of Robert Newton.

RH: Which he kept doing for years and years [laughter].

KM: For years and years. And that's all I do in the films; I'm doing him doing Robert Newton.

RH: Are you aware that Arthur Lowe played a version of Hancock himself in the 1970s, with James Beck?

KM: Yes, it's very interesting. I've actually never seen it.

RH: I was going to ask whether you had.

KM: I've shied away from it a little bit. I don't even know whether they're doing old Hancock scripts.

RH: I think it's an old Hancock script, but it's not him pretending to be Tony Hancock and Beck pretending to be Sid James. It's reworked to suit their personae.¹⁷

KM: I have a feeling I have known about this, but I think I've avoided it, really.

RH: It's an interesting coincidence that you've played both.

KM: That hadn't occurred to me, but that's a really interesting thing. Of course, I loved Arthur Lowe's performance. I had the great honour of auditioning with him once, for *Bless Me, Father* (ITV, 1978-1981). I didn't get the role in the end; Daniel Abineri got the role. But I saw first-hand Arthur's narcolepsy. Because halfway through the scene he just dozed off, and then he just woke up and continued where he was going from before; it was most perturbing,

actually. But you could certainly tell he was – I think I think he was a nice man, and people liked him – but he was a bit of a pompous fellow. I'm so sad I never met Hancock, really, but as I was only twelve when he committed suicide, it was not going to happen.

RH: Presumably you had to do more research on Lowe?

KM: I had to, yeah.

RH: Did you listen to the radio versions of *Dad's Army*, to get the voice?

KM: Yes. Because it's a very interesting thing to do, if you really want to get a voice, it's often good to avoid the visuals. Although, you know the way in which people speak, their face says a lot. But just to listen to the tone and the timbre is very interesting. I got as close as I could get to Arthur Lowe.

RH: I think it's very close; I'd forgotten how close until I watched them again. Did you listen to Lowe in other roles, to work out what his actual voice was? Because he is adopting the pompous Mainwaring voice. In *The Mr Men* (BBC, 1975), for example, he's playing all these different characters, and his northern accent really comes across more.

KM: I was very familiar with him through some of his other work. I mean, I love him in *O Lucky Man!* (Anderson, 1973). He plays about three different parts; he blacks up at one point in it, which sort of blows your mind a little bit now. And he gives a wonderful performance in *The Ruling Class* (Medak, 1972), which is one of my favourite O'Toole movies. But no, I didn't want to listen to Mr Swindley.¹⁸ You know, I didn't want to listen to that sort of slightly posh northern voice that he had. I really wanted to know [adopts Mainwaring voice] where he'd found this, where it was placed in his mouth. I think I got a bit more nasal than he did, but it helped me. It's a bit like the [exhalation], that thing, and it's some of the tropes. Those things can help you get back on track when you start to drift a bit, you know. They're

really good little pins in the butterfly to get you back there accurately without having to worry about it too much.

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¹ McNally was approached to play the role by *The Missing Hancocks* producer Neil Person after the latter acquired a selection of scripts for episodes of the radio situation comedy *Hancock's Half Hour* (Light Programme, 1954-1959) that no longer exist within the archive. Four series were produced between 2014 and 2020.

² This film version *Dad's Army* was written by Hamish McColl and featured an entirely new narrative for the characters from the original sitcom, who, with the exception of the Vicar (Frank Williams), were now played by different actors.

³ Perry and Croft were the creators of *Dad's Army*, and scripted every episode. Croft died in 2011, and Perry in 2016.

⁴ Galton and Simpson scripted every episode of both the radio and television versions of *Hancock's Half Hour*, and also wrote Hancock's feature film *The Rebel* (Day, 1961) before the actor parted ways with them professionally. Both men attended recordings of *The Missing Hancocks*. Simpson died in 2017, and Galton in 2018.

⁵ Kenneth Williams worked regularly on the radio version of *Hancock's Half Hour*, usually playing supporting character parts. He did not appear in the television version (1956-1960)

after the second series. Williams found fame in the *Carry On...* series of cinema comedies (1958-1978; 1992), appearing in a total of twenty-five films.

⁶ Like Kenneth Williams, Sid James was a regular on *Hancock's Half Hour*, appearing in both the radio and television versions. He starred in nineteen *Carry On...* films.

⁷ Eldon played Corporal Jones, originally performed in *Dad's Army* by Clive Dunn. McNally had previously worked with Eldon on *The Missing Hancocks*, in which Eldon recreated Bill Kerr's performance.

⁸ This line was Hancock's customary welcome to each new episode of both the radio and television series.

⁹ Bathurst played Sergeant Wilson, originally performed in *Dad's Army* by John Le Mesurier. Bathurst had previously played Le Mesurier (though not Wilson) in the documentary drama *Hattie* (BBC, 2011).

¹⁰ The three episodes of *Dad's Army – The Lost Episodes* were recorded at Pinewood Studios.

¹¹ McNally and *Dad's Army – The Lost Episodes* co-star Robert Bathurst appeared on the early evening magazine show on 19 August 2019 on to promote the new episodes. Many enthusiastic *Dad's Army* fans were present in the studio.

¹² Hancock guest starred as a reluctant schoolmaster, whose attempts to teach the eponymous Archie – a ventriloquist's doll operated by Brough for the sound only medium of radio – met with little success. Hi catchphrase was 'Flippin' kids!'

¹³ Hancock was contracted to make thirteen episodes of *Hancock Down Under* (Seven Network, 1968) in Australia, but only three were completed before he took his own life on 25 June 1968.

¹⁴ *Hancock* (ATV, 1963) was Hancock's first post-Galton and Simpson television series, and was not well received by critics.

¹⁵ Robert De Niro opted to gain sixty pounds in weight when playing Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980).

¹⁶ Private Frazer was played in *Dad's Army – The Lost Episodes* by David Hayman. In the original series he had been performed by John Laurie.

¹⁷ Lowe and Beck recorded a slightly rewritten version of 'The Economy Drive' (Hancock & Nathan, 1986, p. 198).

¹⁸ Leonard Swindley was Lowe's regular character in *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960-).