

CHAOS AND CREATION IN THE JUNKYARD

Then, in June, came its comedy equivalent: *Steptoe and Son*. It grew out of “The Offer”, one of a Comedy Playhouse season of one-offs written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson - spinning their wheels after Tony Hancock went to ABC without them. Starring Harry H. Corbett and Wilfred Brambell - professional actors rather than comedy performers - the show lifted up the lower-middle class rock on which Anthony Aloysius St. John Hancock’s word was built to examine the lowest of orders - rag and bone men, the middlemen of the junk trade. In so doing, they brought genuine poverty-line squalor to the British sitcom genre, and the living rooms of nice British folk in *Railway Cuttings* and elsewhere for the first time.

Steptoe and Son, in common with the prevailing trends of early 1960s art (all kitchen sinks and angry young men), was just as concerned with authenticity and realism as *Z-Cars*. The set was researched to the last detail, while outside filming took place in a real junk yard, with a genuine rag-and-bone man’s cart and horse - in spite of the fact that the post-war consensus meant the trade was dying out. The authenticity went all the way down to the script level, with no attempt to sanitise the kind of dialogue that went on between people living lives of quiet desperation. Which meant words like “bloody” - still a fairly heavy expletive in 1963 - being flung about the place, along with anatomical and biological references and metaphors so specific that some nice middle-class people had to look them up to be shocked by them.

It was an immediate success, lavished with awards and ultimately granted four series in two years, followed by a further four from 1969 in colour, plus two feature films and an American remake (which, in a reversal of usual practice, was more-or-less equally good) in *Sanford and Son*. At its peak, just about half the television screens in the land were displaying it at the same time.

The viewers in front of those screens were gazing into the absolute lowest tier of British society, as low as one could get before being ejected out of the system altogether. The Steptoes were only above tramps because they had a roof and some walls, and sometimes scraped the odd fistful of money. With sixty years of history in between, it can be hard to understand that it was a semi-revolutionary act just to depict this kind of lifestyle onscreen, without judgement, and even to invite the audience to laugh with, rather than at, the unfortunate characters - particularly the unapologetically grimy, borderline feral Albert Steptoe.

It represented a leap forward in format as well. In hiring actors rather than comedians, with prefabricated routines and personas, the programme was one of the first sitcoms with the emphasis and priority firmly on the “sit”. Comedy, just like drama, could be *about* something in its

own right, other than the people starring in it. Steptoe and Son weren't the first examples of this by any means - Galton and Simpson themselves were already heading in that direction with Hancock, until he abruptly murdered their partnership. But its colossal, unprecedented success helped make it the norm.