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‘Man Out of Time: An Interview with Les Dennis’, *Comedy Studies*, 4 (2)

Les Dennis has been spotted. “Ye’ve been captured, Les”, slurs a bleary-eyed regular in The Strathmore Bar, a classic Leith boozer and one-time working men’s club tucked away near the bottom of Leith Walk. Idling up to our table with a finger pointed at the bemused entertainer, the man continues, “Aw the boys back there, they aw spied ye. Now hows aboot ye buy us aw a roond-a drinks”, he says, only half-joking. Panicked, my mind turns to the scene in *Trainspottin*g where Renton and Begby set upon a wayward American Fringe-goer who accidentally stumbles into a Leith pub asking for the ‘mensroom’. Luckily, Dennis is distinctly unruffled. Bantering happily with his celebrity-stalker, he trades a few well-meaning *Family Fortunes* jokes, invites the new friend to his Fringe play *Jigsy*, and promises to buy ‘the boys’ a drink (all now laughing raucously at the back of the pub) after the interview.

It’s perhaps not surprising that Dennis is at home in local watering holes like The Strathmore Bar. At 17 he started his career playing in similarly boisterous working men’s clubs in his native Liverpool. Back then the fresh-faced Dennis was a fledging impressionist, although he admits, “I nicked most of my act from the best”, meaning the great 70s impressionists Sammy Davis Jnr and Freddie Starr. The clubs though, he says in his now softened Scouse accent, were a fantastic training ground. “You had to learn to compete with the Bingo, compete with the pies. Literally, you would go on, do 5 minutes, and then the hot pies would arrive and suddenly the whole room would empty – brilliant.”

Although Dennis went on to have a successful television career, including 15 years as presenter of *Family Fortunes*, it is less well known that he continued to do the club circuit throughout. This wealth of experience made Dennis the obvious choice to star in Tony Staveacre‘s new Fringe play, *Jigsy*, which is loosely based on the Liverpool comic Jackie Hamilton. The play joins *Jigsy* in 1997 when his career and indeed the whole working men’s club circuit is on its last legs. “He’s man out of time,” explains Dennis. “He’s getting on, he likes a drink, and he wants to share his stories of success as well as reflecting on the things that didn’t work out.”

It’s clear that Dennis remains enamored with the club comedy of his generation. During our hour-long interview he continually draws upon his impressionist skills to lovingly bring to life the club comics he idolized. Taking me on a vocal tour of the North, we travel to Yorkshire with Charlie Williams, Manchester with his comedy partner Dustin Gee, Liverpool with Eddie Flanagan and Newcastle with Bobby Thompson. He’s particularly nostalgic about Thompson, “The Little Waster”, who’s comedy album – Dennis gleefully explains – “outsold the Grease soundtrack in Tyne and Wear in 1978”.

Of course not everyone remembers working men’s comedy so fondly, particularly the bigoted standup of Bernard Manning and the cheap Mother-in-Law gags of Les Dawson, Jim Davidson and Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown. “In Thatcher’s 80s ‘old-school’ was a bit of a dirty word. We had to kind of keep our heads down, we were seen as the old-guard, passé,” Dennis says. Like many of his

generation he seems protective over the legacy of club comedy and grapples to defend the circuit even if this means sidestepping uncomfortable realities. “But not everyone was like that, ” he protests, referring to the Bernard Manning school. “Yes, when you look back now you go fooooh. But at the same time it didn’t seem… Maybe we were less aware, ” he trails off.

One of the most striking things about *Jigsy* is the way in which the plot – a faded star reliving the glamour of past successes - seems to echo the trajectory of Dennis’ own career. Indeed at times Dennis seems to talk about himself and Jigsy as if they’re the same person. “My TV career might not be thriving, but that’s just something you have to accept. Matt Lucas once told me, ‘every comic has there time’, and then audiences move on. But if you become bitter about that – and that’s one thing Jigsy isn’t, bitter – you get eaten up and you don’t progress.”

The story of Dennis’s personal ill fortune in the 2000s is well documented. But for those who somehow avoided the tabloid orgy, first there was the acrimonious split from Amanda Holden, after her very public affair with Neil Morrissey, and then the infamous *Celebrity Big Brother* appearance, where a troubled Dennis was filmed conversing with chickens. I deliberately avoid these personal troubles, figuring Dennis has had more than his fair share of difficult questions. But interestingly he brings it up. “Things clearly took a nosedive after *Big Brother,*” he says. “But then I was saved by Ricky Gervais.”

What does he mean ‘saved’? “Big Brother certainly wasn’t the best timing but if I hadn’t done it then two years later Ricky wouldn’t have picked up the phone and given me the chance to play a twisted, demented version of myself.” Dennis is of course referring to the 2005 episode of *Extras*, where Gervais cast him brilliantly as a deranged semi-fictional pastiche of himself. “It was a real turning point. I’d had 15 years on *Family Fortunes* and suddenly I wasn’t on telly anymore. And as Jigsy says “It’s all you can do, so you carry on”.

But this is where the similarities between Dennis and Jigsy end. While Jigsy is a relic of a dying culture, Dennis has demonstrated an impressive professional versatility in recent years. Certainly he’s older and a little wider than his TV days, but this hasn’t stopped him carving out a successful life as a stage actor. The Fringe, he says, has acted as a pivotal staging point. “It’s a bit like turning the Titanic when you’ve got a reputation as a gameshow host, but I’ve always done things that challenge me, like Edinburgh, put my head above the parapet. It means you keep going forward.”

In person, Dennis certainly defies his lingering public profile as ‘sad Les’, the washed-up entertainer plagued by his past. In fact he’s far more like the Les from *Family Fortunes* – upbeat, good company and full of cheery charm. Indeed, as we leave, Dennis makes a point of returning to his now semi-inebriated Leith fanbase, before quietly taking out his wallet, putting £30 behind the bar, and honouring his round.