

## Television

## ‘My parents were in shock and I think I was too’

As her provocative 1970 sitcom *The Lovers* receives a repeat run, Paula Wilcox looks back on her career at the frontline of TV comedy

By Jon PEAKE

By the time she was 25, Paula Wilcox had achieved more than most people do in a lifetime. She had graced the West End stage, appeared in Britain's stopsoap, had three hit TV sitcoms under her belt and got married. Of those trio of comedies, it's 1973's *Man About the House* she remains best known for today – a programme she wouldn't discuss for years. “I used to find it irritating,” she admits. “I am a serious actress! But now I'm philosophical about it. It is a lovely programme, and it's been really good to me.”

Now 76, Wilcox can boast of a career spanning six decades, and it's clear on meeting her that, starting out, nothing was going to stand in her way.

“I said, ‘I'm going to be an actress!’” she recalls. “And I'm going to do Shakespeare and Chekhov, with maybe a little bit of O'Casey or Pinter...”

After joining the National Youth Theatre at 17, Wilcox moved from her native Manchester to London, living in the Putney YMCA, and immediately started working. “People say now, ‘I'm only 25, I'm still very young,’” she says with incredulity. “God, I was aged when I was 25! I was married at 20 [to actor Derek Seaton]. It's young, but I was ready to get out of my own environment and into a different one. We all were, and it was life-changing.”

Wilcox's big break came with Jack Rosenthal's 1970 comedy series *The Lovers* – currently being repeated on Rewind TV – which made stars of both her and the late Richard Beckinsale. “The premise was that Beryl [Wilcox] very much wanted to get married, and Geoffrey [Beckinsale] very much wanted to experiment sexually,” she explains. “He was excited about the permissive society, but it hadn't really reached Stretford yet.”

Previously, she had roles in *Z-Cars*, *The Wednesday Play* and *Coronation Street* as Ray Langton's 15-year-old sister, in a show that boasted fearsome old stagers like Violet Carson and Doris Speed, which she describes as “very frightening.”

But it was when she was appearing in the play *The Apprentices* in the West End that Rosenthal spotted her and asked her to audition for *The Lovers*. His writing commitments meant the series was delayed by a year, with Wilcox given a two-episode role in his other sitcom, *The Dustbinmen* (also airing on Rewind TV), while *The Lovers* was being readied. When it finally arrived on screen in 1970, it felt like a new con-



◀ The young generation game: Wilcox with Richard O'Sullivan and Sally Thomsett in *Man About the House*; below, alongside Richard Beckinsale in *The Lovers*

cept for television, with young people talking frankly about sex (or the lack of it). “It was slightly controversial in the way that *Man About the House* was, but it was timely,” says Wilcox. “Viewers absolutely loved it because it was the first sitcom about young people.”

The show's pedigree was immense – directed by Michael Apted (of *Seven Up* fame) and written by Rosenthal, who would go on to win a CBE for services to drama, and who left after the first series, handing the writing over to Geoffrey Lancashire (father of actress Sarah), at which point, says Wilcox, the comedy became “broader.”

“Jack didn't write literally how people talk,” says Wilcox. “It was all slightly heightened. It was almost too clever for the characters, a bit surreal. But we were of that age that we could play with it a lot. And we were both from the north.”

Wilcox and Beckinsale hit it off immediately. “We'd made a pilot with another actor as Geoffrey, but it didn't work, and Richard's name was being mentioned a lot. So he came in, and he was brilliant. What was quite nice was, we both had our own partners, so there was no sexual tension between us.” There was, however, bucket-loads of chemistry, and the show was an immediate hit. What did her parents

### ‘I used to find it irritating, always having to discuss *Man About the House*’

make of it? “They never said very much. I think they were in shock. I think I was probably in shock!”

As to be expected, there are elements of the show that might make today's sensitive viewer baulk. In the first episode, Geoffrey proclaims he wants to “rape” Beryl. “Well, to shock people now, you'd

have to go a lot further than that,” states Wilcox.

In 1972, a spin-off feature film was made, but it didn't set the box office on fire. “I don't think it was quite what everybody thought it might be,” recalls Wilcox, and it was to be the final outing for *The Lovers*, the show itself having wound up after two series. “Everybody had had enough of it,” she says. “Jack very much wanted to write the film, and for that to be the end of it.”

The following year she, along with Richard O'Sullivan and Sally Thomsett, struck gold with Thames Television's *Man About the House*, in which Wilcox's sensible Chrissy roomed with lothario chef Robin and flaky sexpot Jo.

“I was asked if I would be interested in doing a series with Richard, who'd just been doing the *Doctors* [series of sitcoms] for them, and of course, I said yes,” she recalls. “They decided that it was going to be about mixed flat sharing, with one man and two girls, which I think they felt was probably safer! And then, of course, they brought in the Ropers [George and Mildred, played by Brian Murphy and Yootha Joyce, who got their own spin-off show in 1976] and it all sort of came together.”

“There was no angst. There were five of us regulars, and we all became

friends and went to each other's houses for meals and things. It was a really happy time.”

Again, the show was considered racy. “It was slightly frowned upon, but it was pretty innocent stuff. People were a little bit shocked that young, fanciable men and women could live together and it not be a den of sin.”

The cast became household names, but while O'Sullivan and Thomsett – both child stars – embraced fame, Wilcox was not comfortable with it.

“I wasn't really very good at all that. I was always kind of embarrassed when people recognised me. Richard was wonderful at it. He was so nice to people, so approachable. I never said no to an autograph, but I did hope that nobody would ask.”

The three are still friends, though O'Sullivan now lives in Brinsworth House, the home for retired actors, after suffering a stroke in 2003. “He's very happy where he is and very much better off,” she says.

Joyce, however, died of alcohol-induced liver failure aged 53 in 1980 at the height of her fame, with screen husband Murphy, who passed away earlier this year, at her side. What kind of person was she? “She was very straight, very funny and very kind,” Wilcox remembers. “She was quite grand and actressy, but in a lovely, approachable way. When she wrote autographs, instead of love or best wishes she used to write ‘with pleasure’. And if she got a studio car home when recording finished late, she'd always tip the driver. She was that sort of person.”

Yet another taboo-busting series followed, with 1977's *Miss Jones and Son*, about – horror! – a working single mother. Was she actively looking to break taboos? “No, I wasn't, but there was a different way of thinking. It may have been outrageous to the older generation, but it felt like that really mattered. The reception was fine though – it went straight to number one in the ratings, but I think Mary Whitehouse had something to say about it.”

However, she bailed after two series. “And I'm not sure I should have done. But I'd been doing sitcoms since I was 18, and I just wanted to branch out. It was hard, but I survived.”

Then in 1979, she was dealt a double blow when Beckinsale died of a heart attack aged just 31, followed several months later by Wilcox's husband, who was only 35. “I was doing [Alan Ayckbourn's] *Bedroom Farce* on stage when the news came in about Richard. It was really



◀ Paula Wilcox: ‘The comedies I did may have outraged the older generation, but I felt like that really mattered’

shocking. I didn't know what to do at all. But we had to do the show. You just go through the motions. And then my husband died about six months later, very, very suddenly. It came out of nowhere.”

As the Eighties dawned, Wilcox faced an uncertain future. She did some TV – the series *Boon* and *The Bright Side*, and took over from Pauline Collins in a touring version of *Shirley Valentine*, but it wasn't a great decade for her. “The Eighties were strange because of all that loss. I was a little bit wobbly. I was working a lot – I did quite a lot of theatre, but I didn't do much telly. I just stayed away. I travelled the world with Derek Nimmo, who used to put on plays in places like Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Dubai. It was fabulous.”

It was in the late Nineties that her career rallied, and in the past two decades she's appeared in, among

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other things, *Footballers' Wives*, *Mount Pleasant*, *Blue Heaven* (as Frank Skinner's mother), *The Smoking Room*, *Boomers*, *Upstart Crow* and even gone back into *Coronation Street* for a spell. She also appeared in children's show *The Queen's Nose*, which introduced her to a whole new generation.

Not about to put her feet up, Wilcox is still working – she'll soon appear in a Channel 5 drama, *The Family Fortune*, with Eleanor Tomlinson and Matthew Lewis – and she's in a good place emotionally, married for the past 34 years to American composer Nelson “Skip” Riddle, son of legendary musician Nelson Riddle, whom she met on a beach while holidaying solo in Hawaii.

So looking back at *The Lovers*, now, what would Wilcox tell her 21-year-old self?

“I would say, ‘Listen more to what people say, you don't know as much as you think you know,’” she says, before breaking into a chuckle. “But I think the 21-year-old me would not heed any advice she was given. You have to play life your own way.”

*The Lovers* and *The Dustbinmen* are on Rewind TV on Mondays