The Comedy Unit - BBC Manchester

Over 250 writers and performers attended the launch night of the Northern BBC Comedy Unit on 30th October 2003 at Jongleurs in Manchester.

The following is the transcript of an informal master-class given by **Kenton Allen**, BBC Editor of Comedy ; **Graham Linehan**, Writer of Father Ted, Black Books, Big Train ; **Susan Nickson**, writer of Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps ; and **Fred Barron**, the creator of My Family.

'Grin' Transcript:

K = Kenton G = Graham S = Susan F = Fred

K Your day to day job is writing comedy. How do you actually go about it?

G When I work with Arthur, we get together at around 12, we read papers for about 5 hours and then we write for an hour … and then we play computer golf. That's basically it. Actually that's not quite true. Arthur's always had a real work ethic, so when I'm working with him I'm at my most productive. We work for 4 or 5 hours every day.

K But do you have a routine when you're on your own?

G Yes. I do the day I just described, except for real.

K Without the writing?

G With the writing. But, but very little writing. I just do just enough so that I won't feel guilty. And then I play computer golf!

K And Susan, do you have computer golf?

S I don't have computer golf. I have "This Morning", when it used to be with "Richard and Judy". That was a great 'putter offer'. Now, I like Terry and Gaby! Watching those shows are my way of putting things off. It's the nature of writing, that you procrastinate and procrastinate until it gets to 4 o'clock and…and then it's tea time.

K And does that happen with a team-written show?

F Yes. There's just a lot more of us doing it. The way I work is, I panic. I put things off as long as I can because basically, we all know we're funny and writing is just making choices.

G I don't know I'm funny…

K But Fred, you say you know you're funny – I'm not sure Graham and Susan know that they're funny. That's a very confident American thing to say.

F You write to prove you're funny. That's the reason you write.

G Every time you hand something in you're asking – 'Am I funny?' And then they tick the box.

G I don't think I could do this if I thought it was only for other people.

F Why should it depend on them? You know you're funny.

G No I, I think I'm strange. I don't think I'm funny.

K Let's get back to basics. How did you all get your first break writing TV comedy?

F Luck plays a huge part and anybody who says it's just hard work is lying. You need the hard work to get there. I was a journalist and I'd take the piss out of everything. The reason I started writing films is because I'd never seen a film script! I sat down to write a play. It was like 'Shakespeare did this – f***!' so I couldn't do that. So I wrote a screen play. At the time I was a journalist and I was covering a festival.

K What sort of journalist were you?

F Bad! I wrote about The Arts, and anything that would pay.

K You were a journalist as well, Graham, weren't you?

G Yes. I was writing in Ireland for a music magazine and then I came over to England to write for another music magazine. And because they would only let me interview bands like Inspiral Carpets, who I thought were OK …

S They're from Manchester!

G They are from Manchester. But let's face it. They were just OK. I think I just saw someone down there that might be in them! But after a while, I got frustrated 'cos I wasn't allowed to write about the bands I really cared about. So I asked Arthur to come over and he had a few ideas. We started writing sketches and sending them in to "Smith and Jones".

K Uninvited?

G Yes. Here's Tip One of the evening. When you look at the credits of a show and there's lots of people, you should probably write to the producer of that show. When we saw the credits on "Smith and Jones" we thought 'loads of people write for that – we'll write for that.'

S Would that only work for a sketch show?

G I don't know. I'd never send a sitcom script in of a show that already existed. Would you?

K That happens more in America doesn't it?

F The way it would work in the States is you'd write a spec script of a show that does exist, to show that you can do it. I think it's good to prove you can write somebody else's show, to prove you have the

ear, you have a sense of structure and you can tell a story. I'm hoping that there will be more opportunities to get into the system without just saying 'I have to create my own show and I'll stand or fall on this thing.'

K Susan, you entered the Lloyd's Bank Film Challenge didn't you?

S Yes, that's where it started off. I think competitions are the best way in to any sort of writing. The BBC run loads of competitions.

K But how old were you when you won the competition?

S 14.

K How old are you now?

S 25.

K So you're a bit of a child prodigy?

S No, I don't think so.

K But where did that desire to write comedy at the age of 14 come from?

S I'm pretty sure it's true of everyone on this panel that when you start to write something, even if you try and make it into a drama, it's going to end up a comedy, 'cos that's what comes spilling out of your brain onto the page.

F When I was joking earlier, saying that we all know we're funny - I do think it's important that you know that you've got something, otherwise why bother? When I started out, I wrote a 4-paragraph film review that I sent into an underground newspaper and I got back a 3-page single-spaced letter back from the editor saying why I should never, ever write again. And I came away thinking 'Wow! He responded'. You've got to absolutely believe that you've got something worth saying. I know it's essential that other people like it for us to make a living. But if you don't feel that sense of yourself you're gonna be screwed from the start. 'Cos then you're gonna be always trying to catch up with 'what they might want' and that's the worst place to be.

K When you're writing a comedy series, where do you start?

G I try to coalesce all the things that are interesting me at the time and see what types of people best represent those things. And then once I've found those people, I try to give them names and see if they'll start talking.

K Can you tell us what you're writing about at the moment?

G I.T. It's the people in every building who fix computers. I've written one script, but I don't know if it's working. It may take another 6 months before it starts working. I just realised that things like texting, emails and stuff like that are affecting people's lives in very strong ways. And I didn't see millions of shows that were reflecting that, so I thought that might be a good thing to write a show about. So that's what it's about … I bet you someone in the audience is thinking 'But I'm writing things about IT!' What I'd say to that it's probably completely different, and I wouldn't worry about it. I'd keep writing it anyway.

K But are you starting with the world of IT, or starting with characters?

G I had a bunch of ideas that seemed very technological or computer based. I mentioned something to my wife about computer geeks and stuff and she actually suggested I could call it "The IT Crowd" and I thought 'That's a brilliant title!' So I've actually just completely ignored everything else, because I want to keep that title. So at the moment, that's why it's about IT people, who I know nothing about. And I really do have to do some research. But I'm just basing it on my ignorance of the whole world.

K Where do you start? It's Monday morning – 10 … or 4 o'clock in the afternoon. You've got a blank screen.

F It never starts at the screen. It always starts with walking around. I'll draw from everything - the people I see or things that I hear; I look at a lot of people on buses. It's all going to be from character, and then you just play with it, make stuff up and see what clicks. And nothing comes alive until a character actually starts to talk. You say 'A' and they say '5' – then you know there's something there, that they're starting to talk to you. And then if you're lucky, you're basically a secretary, and you're just writing it down.

K Susan, how, what about you? Two Pints is set in Runcorn, and it's about young people. How did you come up with the series?

S The premise of the series is from my own experience. When you're faced with a blank screen, I always think the best thing to do is just start writing. Because even if you've got 4 or 5 pages by the end of the day that are absolute rubbish – at least you've started. At least you're on a road to somewhere, even if there's only a little seed of a story line. You know that something will come of it if you just carry on. And you might even get a joke.

F I figure that doing the first draft means doing it wrong. So if you start waiting for the absolute right thing to start writing, you're gonna be screwed. You just keep writing – I wouldn't even read it over until it's done.

G Some writers write a first draft, and then they throw it away. And they don't read it to write the second draft. I wouldn't be able to do that. But it just goes to show how unimportant first drafts can be. They're just a thing that you have that you can say 'Well I've done that, and now I'm gonna make it better.'

K Do you think it's true that the art of re-writing is learning to throw things away?

G I personally think that if you're throwing away really good stuff, it means that you're on the right track. If you're throwing away crap, then you're writing crap. I think the problem is a lot of the time that people think they have to hold on to every joke no matter what. Even if it has nothing to do with the character, it's something they'd never say, they're holding onto it because they think it's so funny. Maybe it is funny, but throw it away. It's more important that the character starts speaking, they start coming up with things of their own and you're letting them play. As Fred was saying, when you're writing, you sit down and you're like a secretary or it's like you've turned on a tape recorder, and you're actually listening to what they say. And when Arthur and I were writing Ted, the reason it was fun and enjoyable was because we would come in and sit down and be completely amazed by what they were saying. And I watch it now and I don't remember writing any of those jokes.

K But can you talk about the difference between great characters and great jokes?

G A great character is a great joke. A great joke can appear in a bad sitcom, and your sitcom will still be crap. A great character will give birth like an ant or something. What gives birth to a lot of things?

K A whale?

G OK, like a whale, a great character will give birth to lots of moments and not just jokes but situations and other characters. And you won't say to yourself 'This joke about the Internet is really funny'. You'll actually think to yourself 'Wow, I wonder what would happen if that type of person I met today would do to the person I've created? What would they say to each other? They'd have a fight. What kind of fight would they have? They'd do this, blah, blah, blah – that might lead to this.' And then suddenly you're flowing. If you're holding on to that one little joke that made your friends laugh, that'll never happen. And the joy of it is not that little joke – the joy of it is, is those characters.

K That begs a question then – what makes a great comedy character?

F That's too hard a question. I'd just like to point out that when we say 'Throw away jokes,' we mean 'save'. There'll always be something you can use it in. But if a scene's not working and you know it might

be because you're throwing away everything else to save the joke, throw it away. You'll use it somewhere else either in that script or in another script.

K Fred, how did the character of Larry Sanders come about?

F I think we knew the world, God knows we knew Garry and we spent a lot of time with the Tonight show and it kind of evolved. We were writers but we were also producers. We were doing a show that was not just the script. If you just fall in love with your script, you're gonna be screwed. So much is going to happen when you get the actors, and then you start re-writing to their voices. When you start seeing magic happening on the screen that you never dreamed of then you start writing to that. Like in Seinfeld, Kramer – we didn't have a clue who he was. So all we had was he was gonna come in, in a different way, every week. And then through Michael Richards we started saying 'Oh…here's who he is.' I think what we do is a grand collaboration. That's where I come from. If you can use that collaboration with the actors, with the director, with other writers, the world starts to flesh out itself. Kris Marshall in My Family came in with a very different rhythm than I'd originally imagined. And his was better. So why not write to that?

K Susan, did you radically re-write what you'd originally envisaged when the actors came on board?

S I was incredibly lucky in that I got the cast that I really wanted, other than a couple of people who were unknown before. But you still have to re-write it when an actor comes up to you and says 'Well I'm not happy with this line because…' . They've got their own ideas of what the character should be. As it goes on you get to know the actors and realise what they're good at. And so you start writing more into the show, say visually specifically because you know what they can do. I found out this series that one of the girls can make a 3-leaf clover with her tongue. So it was like straight away, I'm sticking that in the script.

K And Graham, you've written your script, you think you know what the show is and then you get actors on board. Does the show then change from what you'd originally envisaged?

G Yeah absolutely. I'm not sure how important that is for people here today though. I think one of the problems that happens with writers is thinking ahead of themselves when they're writing, for example 'Oh what if an actor doesn't like this'. The most important thing at this stage is to sit down and write a first draft, and then write a second draft, and not care about what the rest of the world thinks – actors, execs – anyone at all. Even though Execs become very important and very useful, in the early stages, it's just really important that you're sitting there and you're making yourself laugh - and that's it really. Here's Tip Two of Graham's Tips. There's a book called Bird by Bird – by Anne Lamott and it's the best book about writing

you'll ever read. It's absolutely amazing. Her first chapter is actually called 'S****y First Drafts.' I think if people are at that stage where they've got a great idea, one of the worst problems is the embarrassment you feel when you're writing down stuff and you think 'Who the hell am I? This is just s*** and these people aren't real and I'm lying and everyone's gonna find me out…' Anne's great at talking about that kind of feeling.

S But when you actually submit stuff to a TV company though, don't you think you should have a list of actors who you'd like to play your parts, just so that the reader can think about actors' voices when they're reading it?

G That's a way you can do it. I've done it that way myself. But I think there's that way, and there are other ways. Personally my favourite thing is to create characters and then when an actor's name is mentioned, you go 'Oh yeah, he could play that character.' And it makes you think of them in a different way.

S But when you're sat there writing these lines out, haven't you got a voice in your head that's saying the lines?

F Yes, but it's not an actor's voice. It's my voice.

S It's not your voice, it's somebody else's

G Mine tells me to kill people. Yes, you have a voice. But it should be the character's voice, surely? When we were writing Father Ted, whenever I was writing Mrs. Doyle, it was my mother's voice and my aunts' voices. We didn't know Pauline who played Mrs. Doyle. She auditioned at the very last moment and I have to be honest, did it exactly as we wanted it to be done. So sometimes you'll be thinking of someone and sometimes you won't. I think it's a very fluid, organic process, isn't it?

K When you've got a great cast, do you feel a tremendous responsibility to make everybody as funny as possible? How do you not go home feeling guilty that you've under-served some very talented actor in your show?

F You don't write unfunny characters.

G That's it, you don't write a character who's not funny.

F And if they don't have lines, you don't keep them on stage. You find some reason to exit them.

G Or you cut them from the script early on. Embarrassingly this happened once when we'd hired an actor and it was only when he was actually playing the role that we realised we didn't need this character at

all. And there were moments where I was waving to him as he was going 'Yeah, no that's great, that's great.' And I knew that it wasn't gonna go much further than the studio audience. So that happens – it's terrible but there's nothing you can do about it. Sometimes you have to try things out to know they're right or wrong.

K There are a lot of writer/performers here tonight. Can you shed any light on the additional challenges of doing both? You've worked with Seinfeld, Fred, who I know is a writer on that show. What complications did that add and what's the strength of having somebody who writes and performs their own material?

F I think the strength of it is you, the writer/performer has a vision. The downside would be if he or she isn't aware that other characters for a series have to have lives too. Jerry was extraordinarily generous about it, same with Garry (Shandling) – so I've been lucky in that. But often times there are performers like…

K Who are they? Name names, come on!

F Well I won't say 'Roseanne' but no. There are performers who are brilliant and funny, but it's kind of their show and I think when a sitcom that's based around a performer's voice works, it's when they're generous enough to see that they're part of an ensemble. Which, if you're coming from stand up is extremely hard, because you're used to being out there alone. Part of a stand up's life is you trust yourself, or you certainly don't trust anybody else, because it's your ass that's out there. And to go from that to going to a world where somebody else is gonna get the jokes, somebody else is gonna get the scene, the story might not be involving you, you have to have a very generous spirit.

K Graham, was that your experience, - you've written for The Fast Show and you created Ted and Ralph with Arthur for Paul Whitehouse and Charlie Higson. What's different for you, when you've got guys there you're writing for, who also write for themselves?

G I think it depends. Like Dylan (Moran), for instance, who I wrote Black Books with – it was his idea - and he was very generous. He was great at giving other characters lines, but the reason was because all of the characters were a part of Dylan. The character of Fran was his ideal of a woman and the character of Manny was his ideal of a best friend. And his character was the way he sees himself or the way he wants to see himself. I always think that your characters can't all have positive characteristics. They all

have to have lots of negatives for them to be funny. Most good comedians or great comedians know that the worse they look, the funnier the thing'll be.

K Is it worth then, going back to the original question, which is 'What makes a good comedy character?' 'because you haven't quite answered it for me anyway, what are those crucial, intrinsic things that make great comic characters?

F Well I don't know what makes great, but I think that if you can put the character alone in a room and there's enough conflict for a scene, then you know you've got something.

K I'd like to talk about team writing now. Fred – could you tell us about it because I'm sure everybody here is fascinated to hear how it actually works. There's all sorts of myths about how it works. Could you once and for all explain to people what team writing means.

F The way we do My Family and the way we do shows in the States is there's a group of writers as opposed to 'Well you work alone'. You work with a team, you work in partnership. People when they think of team writing think of a bunch of people sitting around a table together, writing a script all together. And to me that's a gang bang. Team writing is, you sit down, you work out stories together based on the pilot that the show runner/creator created, and then you go from there.

K So you have a pilot script which you have written on your own?

F Yeah. I'll write a script on my own or somebody else will write a script on their own. You'll then get a group of writers together and say 'Let's do more.' And so you're all basing it on these characters who were originally created. You'll break stories together, you'll come up with story lines. Then the writers will all go off on their own and write their scripts. Now the way I think it's normal here is, when you've written your script, you'll have an editor, y'know a comedy editor or somebody, either a producer, or a script editor from the studio or the network. Instead of having that, what we'll have is 5 or 6 other funny comedy writers, and we'll edit each other's stuff. We'll punch it up, we'll look for holes in each other's stories. There are a couple of real values to that, and I'm not saying by any means that this is the only way to do it at all. Because you take a look at your shows, you go 'Doh…' I mean they're great shows out there. So what's nice about the way that we'll do stuff in a team is we can do a lot of episodes. Of the last series, we did 26 episodes of My Family.

K That's compared to 6 a year.

F Yeah.

K You did 26 last year.

F There's no real plus except that you get a rhythm going. One of the nice things about having a team is you can be watching it – every script isn't written before you start - so you can discover stuff along the way. So if somebody starts emerging, you can say 'OK let's re-write the script that we're gonna shoot in 2 weeks, change that and give this actor or this actress more.' 'Oh – this relationship's working, let's play with that.' You get much more of a chance to improvise. Also, I've said this before, but team writing is, at its best, like a jazz combo – a really tight combo, where everybody's a great soloist, and you feed off each other. There can always be a better joke, there can always be a better idea out there. And you're just playing with the big kids. It's great fun. One other thing that I think is very helpful that I've noticed since I've been in the UK is there don't seem that many ways for young, talented writers to get into the business without getting his or her own show. And it's a drag, because then it's all make or break, you're thrown into it. The way the American system of team writing works is, it's almost like an apprenticeship system, where you start out at the table, and you might get a script, but you're always working at somebody else's script. You're punching things up, you're there on the floor, you're talking to the actors, and you evolve. And you evolve in a situation where you've got friends, you've got a safety net - so you're not gonna land on your ass. I mean it's not gonna be awful. At worst you'll come away and you'll say 'I wasn't embarrassed today.'

G I think though that like every form of writing, that's got advantages and disadvantages, because I'm sure you admit that lots of American shows, just like lots of British shows, don't…

F Are s***…

G Yeah, are s***. And it's because of a certain homogenisation in the way jokes are constructed and that people suddenly think it'll be funny to say 'Girlfriend' after every line or something like that, d'you know what I mean?

F Yep.

G …and having a group of people who'll support you in putting 'Girlfriend' at the end of a line…

F And saying…yes. Very dangerous.

G …is a bad thing as well– and the opposite is true of all those shows that you see about half 2 in the morning like Coach? Or something like that – which is fine. But it's not great and that's why it's on at half 2 in the morning.

K I think what we should do now is look at some examples of shows you've written and then hear from you what happened through the process. So first up, we have a clip from the first series of Father Ted, and it's Father Ted and Father Dougal, lamenting the passing of Father Jack. And they've decided to spend the night in the crypt, with his body.

CLIP

K Graham where on earth did all that come from?

G That was the first episode we wrote of Father Ted. And the reason I asked for it to be shown was because you were talking about taking out sections that show principles of how to write. Ted and Dougal sit down and they say 'Do you believe in an after life?' Which is a strange question for a priest to ask another priest. It was the thing that made us laugh and the thing that made us think 'How can we get them to have that conversation?' And that led to the idea of they're in a crypt, and we had a character who, when we wrote a pilot, had died. And we came up with a very standard sitcom device which is they have to stay with the body because of a thing in the will, which is bulls*** but because Ted is a surreal idea, it's able to withstand that kind of silly plot device. So we used the plot device just to get them into a room together on their own in the dark and the things that arose out of that were a philosophical discussion, a game of charades and basically my point in showing it was that sometimes you can get a very simple and very bad idea, an idea that as I said earlier would embarrass you, even to put down on paper. But because it's led to jokes, a lot of which I'm really proud of that came out of the 'thought bubble' that's above me, you can use them without embarrassment.

K Because you're just writing the characters?

G Yeah, it's the characters that are important. No-one cares about the plot. No-one cares, as long as you give people something to hold onto, as long as it's not too stupid. I mean at the end of that episode, Jack rises from the dead. Which is such a cheat and it provides a moment where Ted screams, which is

another laugh, you tick that off. And then the next day they explain, and they say 'why did Jack survive?' And our explanation was a character-based explanation, which is that Jack drinks such an odd combination of household fluids and alcohol and various different things, that it actually somehow kept him alive even though it's absolute nonsense…

K But what you're saying controversially is plot doesn't really matter and character is everything?

G I would say in something like Seinfeld plot is very important. But still, it's completely engineered by the characters. I think in the end the argument of plot versus character will go on and on – kind of pointlessly. Because in the end they're so inter-linked, plot and character that you can't divide them. Plot is character, and character is plot.

K And Fred, what about Seinfeld? Do you start thinking about a good story to put your character through?

F No. If anything we started with that myth that it was about nothing, and it became…about something…

K Explain the myth then. 'Cos everybody says Seinfeld's a show about nothing.

F We wanted to do something that was just gonna be about ourselves. It would just be about people in their daily lives, without saying 'We're gonna have this, y'know, strange sitcom where the 'sit' takes over.' Interestingly enough, Seinfeld did evolve into the most tightly-plotted sitcom.

K How did that come about?

F It came about because the episodes were just always too long and the stories kept growing and it was totally in editing that the idea of these short scenes came about.

K Because you were overrunning?

F Yes. There was way too much material. And then it had taken on a rhythm of its own.

K So it's an accident?

F Not an accident, it's organic.

K …part of the process.

F Yeah.

K And Susan, do you start with story or characters?

S Well, it's like I was saying before, you don't really start with anything. You have a general idea of where the characters may go this week, and then the most important thing is to start writing. And after that,

it's kind of 'Let's see where they go.' But as you say, the first draft is usually absolute crap and after that you can just say 'Well let's take this bit out and let's sculpt the storyline into something that's coherent and useable.'

K OK. Let's move on from there and look at a clip of My Family which Fred created.

CLIP OF "MY FAMILY"

K What Fred has managed to do is create a pre-watershed comedy that appeals to an enormous audience. Its average audience is 8 or 9 million viewers a week. It has the same 16 to 34 year old demographics as Pop Idol. And it's incredibly important that we as comedy writers and producers and directors and actors, embrace the prime time audience before 9 o'clock, as well as go off and do our other things after 9 o'clock. It's an extraordinary achievement that they made 26 shows of my Family last year, and that a massive new audience for comedy is coming back time and time again for that show and for a sitcom.

F What I wanted to do with My Family was basically that the Seinfeld generation now have our own kids. It was interesting why My Family was originally created because I wanted to write about parents. After the first series it became about me and my wife and my kids. When I stopped being Nick and I became Ben, I was where the stories were coming from. I mean one of the goals was to create a kind of Seinfeld with kids, but it wasn't gonna be about who wrecked the roast, those typical sitcom family things, but it was just gonna be about the normal, everyday crap that you have to go through, and how can you survive with these people you've got to live with? What I thought was interesting, talking about how some things evolve, that in the original pilot of My Family, there was one Ben and Susan scene that was maybe 30 seconds long, the bedroom scene. And when we saw that when Robert and Zoe were together, maybe second rehearsal, it was so clear that there was a magic there. And they had that bedroom, the kind of fantasy bedroom where you felt safe – you wanted to hear them talking, you wanted to hang out in that bed. In which case it became about Ben and Susan because of that bedroom scene, and part of the fun of having a team is we could take all of our scripts, and put those scenes in. Things that we would set in the kitchen, it takes on a certain intimacy in the bedroom. So it wasn't like 'Oh we're gonna now make up a bedroom scene.' And that's become a place that I just love.

K It's when you saw the chemistry between the two actors …

F But it's not just the chemistry. I saw the heart of the show. I mean chemistry is great, but then you've to build on that and say it isn't about a family, it's about two people who basically have a family, and don't have a f***ing clue. There wasn't a rule book, they're from the '60s or the '70s. I thought the drug episode was a lot of fun because, I mean, we're all in that situation. And what happens when our kids wanna smoke?

K Speak for yourself, Fred, frankly.

F I mean so I've heard. These things come up! And how do you lie to your kids? And under the guise of having integrity.

K Here's a clip from Two Pints and it's a very visual scene.

CLIP OF TWO PINTS

K Susan we were talking earlier about how once you had your cast you wrote more physical scenes or sight gags with them in mind.

S The reason I chose that clip was to do with the sort of learning curve you go on. That's like the third series now. And in the first series there wasn't any visual stuff at all. In the first series, as I got to know the actors, I'd put 'Will will do something funny here.' And that's sort of lazy writing, and later on you find out what they're up for and what they're not up for.

K How far you can push them?

S Yes. Because it's not words, and because it's not an actual joke, it isn't them saying something. It's nothing that you can actually see with your eyes on the page. There's a certain amount of trust involved in that, and that's where you kind of have to let your baby go.

K Does that come out of rehearsal and just working with the actors and getting to know what they can and can't do?

S No, it's a degree of confidence in yourself and just thinking 'Right I'll let this go and I'll let this ride. Because I'm pretty sure this'll work out for the best in the end'.

K It's worth talking about visual comedy with you two (Graham and Fred) as well. Because I immediately think of two things – Mrs. Doyle falling off the window ledge and Kramer's entrances. And they're 2 iconic comedy moments. Did you write 'Mrs. Doyle falls off the window ledge' every episode?

G Yes.

K Well done.

G But she did it once and we thought she was so funny at it, that we did it ad nauseum after that, y'know. But I wouldn't be as brave as you (Susan) are in not writing. We didn't leave anything to chance. And I think if you're starting off, it's probably a good idea to really write every single thing that people say and do. Although what you shouldn't do is tell the actors how to do a line. If you've written it correctly, then the scene will be leading up to them doing the line in the exact right way you want them to do it.

F Oh you are so lucky.

K Fred- why? You have a different take on this?

F I'm trying to think of how diplomatic I can put this. No, the idea that you can trust them all the time.

G Oh I'm not saying trust actors – never do that! I'm saying that you can write in such a way that, for instance, you can write picking up this glass is important in a scene, I think it's a bad thing to write 'Close up of glass'.

F Oh I see what you mean.

G The thing to write is 'He sees the glass' in one line, and then the director will put in a shot of the glass. So you're not actually telling anyone how to do their job, but you are writing it in such a way that you're creating a little visual note. You're showing people what's important. And things like putting 'GLASS' in capitals and nothing else in capitals will help things like that along. Seriously it really works, because people go 'Oh – glass – that's important!'. Because sometimes people read scripts don't they, in the way of 'Blah bla-blah, bla-bla-bla-bla, bla-blah – Glass.' 'Blah bla-bla-bla-bla, bla-bla bla-blah – Drinks.' ''Blah bla-bla-bla-blah', they tend to skim and stuff like that. So you've got to write in a very punchy way.

K So you put in as much detail as possible?

G Yeah, there was very little improvisation. I'm sorry – that sounds very arrogant but we just liked all our jokes and we didn't want anyone else to do them. If someone could beat it, you certainly used that, but if not – no.

K Well that's how team writing works, presumably Fred?

F Yeah. I mean, the goal is to make it funny and true at the same time. And generally what the writers and I try to work with, we always try to figure out what happens, 'what it's about'. But then 'what's it really about?' I mean what's going on in the characters that makes this even worth writing about?

G And I am joking about actors as well - of course they bring the character to life and give great suggestions and so on.

F Yeah.

G But I do think as a writer and not as a director/writer, or as Woody Allen and actor/writer/director – your only responsibility is to make the scripts as funny as they possibly can be.

F I can remember when I first started, it was like I thought I had to anticipate everything. So I would say 'Graham – parentheses – thinking about his brother lost in Vietnam.'

G Hello. I was thinking about him!

F And the actors would just sit there with like a pen, and just cross out every stage direction and I'd be like 'Don't do that.'

K I'm afraid we've run out of time so you could you please join me thanking Graham, Fred and Susan for being so open and honest about what they so brilliantly do and for giving up so much of their time. Thank you very much.

APPLAUSE