

Linda Smith is widely regarded as one of the wittiest women on radio and television. Renowned for her topical, political and surreal sense of humour, she is currently embarking on a major UK tour. **Piers Ford** catches up with her as she heads towards East Anglia



A half-hour conversation with Linda Smith is like being treated to your own private show. The comedian's deceptively mordant wit constantly underpins the wry and Eeyore-like social commentary that has made her a favourite among Radio 4 listeners and in great demand as a guest on panel game shows from *Call My Bluff* to *Have to Have I Got News For You*. Before you realise it, you've covered WI talks, the creeping evils of modern business-speak, Tim Henman's fans (famously, one of her choices for an appearance on *Room 101*) and why it's high time that Essex County Council recognised Ian Dury for the folk hero that he is.

It isn't that she trades in one-liners all day ("a person like that would be a nightmare, a real bore"), just that she has a knack of exposing the comic weak spots of situations, people and politics with a combination of irony and fondness for human frailty that strikes an

instant chord of recognition. Like the finest comedians of her genre, from Tony Hancock to Paul Merton, there's a sanguine grimness behind her, often surreal, observations that is irresistible.

Suggest to her that comics need to suffer in order to deliver the laughs and she just guffaws: "Oh yes. Even now I'm driving nails into my feet trying to dig up a few jokes! I don't think pain is exclusive to comedians. It's just the world, really. That's how life is. But there's such a huge amount to make you laugh in Britain today. Things like local life. People are genuinely funny and say such funny things."

Now she's back on the road with her favourite medium, stand-up, and gathering new material all the time. A recent appearance at an arts festival in East Sussex, in a village hall with a 1950s painted backdrop—"it looked like Captain Malmwaring should have been drilling the lads in it"—intrigued her.

"The week before, there'd been a talk called *Fun With Serviettes* delivered by Mrs Minnie Peerless of the WI," she says. "I've been trying to track her down and I really want to see her show. I might even use her as my interval act. I'm just worried that there's a whole area of hedonism that I'm missing out on, surrounding serviettes."

The circumstances of today's young comics, she thinks, are very different to her own origins as an English and Drama graduate at Sheffield University. They are often pursuing the business as a career choice. Linda had no specific professional ambition. She simply found herself connecting directly with audiences through sketches and banter.

"It just grew from there, really," she says. "I realised it was for me. You feel like a fish in water. I think when I was starting out it was probably a more exciting scene just because it was all so new. And there was this range of

people that were quirky and, basically, unemployable! They ended up doing this because they didn't fit into the world of work. We didn't go into it with any expectations of being on television because at that stage the mainstream wasn't open to accommodating anything new. So that's been a huge change."

Linda has come a long way since then. Character-building experiences like a gig at Middlesbrough Polytechnic—"I don't know what it's called these days, the Sorbonne or something," she says acidly—have been left behind.

"I was sharing the bill with Mark Steel and it was a nightmare: tequila was three pence a gallon; the audience was blind drunk and seemed to consist mainly of the Rugby Club. The microphone didn't work, and they were completely baffled by me because they couldn't see why a woman might be standing on stage unless she was going to take her clothes off. We were staying in this godforsaken bed and breakfast and after the show we ate in a restaurant full of bouncers, starting at the food to avoid getting into a fight; then there was a terrible journey home on a nightmare Sunday engineering train."

Now, she's pleased to report that people come along because they want to see her and while it was a thrill to turn around a hostile crowd and make them laugh—"it's something gladiatorial"—she no longer feels the need to do it.

Linda's comedy heroes are as wide-ranging as her live act material. She remembers the excitement of diverging from family tastes (Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper, Porridge, "all those great shows") to Peter Cook and Dudley Moore and later, Monty Python. "I was too young to understand half of it but it really made me laugh, particularly Pete and Dud," she recalls.

"I got the *Dogenham Dialogues* from the library and learned them. Now that does have a very English melancholy feel about it... But today, the range is so great. Like everyone, I love *The Office*. But most recently I've been impressed with *Curb Your Enthusiasm* from Larry David, the co-creator of *Seinfeld*. It's a masterclass in writing really brilliant comedy. And there are a lot of people I've always liked: Mark Steel, Jeremy Hardy and Harry Hill."

She says you do have to pinch yourself when you find yourself walking in the steps of some of the greats—Kenneth Williams on *Just a Minute* or William Rushton on *Sorry, I Haven't a Clue*. But if a 2002 Radio 4 poll in which Linda was voted the wittiest person on the station is to be believed, she's more than earned her right to be there.

"You do have a feeling of being part of British



Totally topical taste: Linda Smith, currently on tour in the region, is renowned for her political and surreal sense of humour

comedy history in a way you could never have dreamed of," she says. "There's a sense of continuity. And it's brilliant the way these shows have renewed themselves while keeping true to their original form. They could so easily have died out when many of the panellists did."

She was the first female team captain on *The News Quiz*. "If you thought about it too much, you'd be terrified," she adds. "Fools rush in, I suppose." And, aside from the satire, she's also contributed to programmes like *The Roots of English* and *Word of Mouth*, talking about language and literature.

Linda reserves her most billious remarks for the insidious corporate language and therapy-speak that's creeping into spoken English. "People's use of language is a great source of comedy," she says. "But I hate all that stuff: terrible jargon and buzzwords that people who work for, say local authorities or arts institutions, speak in. It's ugly and uncreative and it isn't communication. They can only speak to each other in it. I think it's quite sinister, even Stalinist, and it takes away people's ability to have original thought."

She's fighting back, not just in her act but also with her Ian Dury campaign. She presented the BBC's *Great Lives* programme on the legendary singer/songwriter and you suspect she's probably only half joking when she says she wants to see stanzas from his lyrics dotted

around Essex towns. "Oh golly, oh gosh, come and lie on a couch with a nice bit of posh from Burnham-on-Crouch' sounds so much better than, 'Burnham-on-Crouch welcomes careful drivers'," she says.

"It's his lyrical brilliance, that kind of proletarian poetry. He's part of this great line from Dickens and Mayhew, all those grubby lives. Jeremy Hardy campaigns for Palestine, so I have Ian Dury. It'll be a blow for real language." She's still waiting for a response from Essex County Council.

LINDA SMITH LIVE

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