

The Dynamic Duo

Comedy writers Phil Collinge and Andy Lord are a successful writing team who have earned commissions from both BBC Television and Radio, Carlton Television and a host of independent production houses at home and abroad. *Carol Anne Strange* catches up with them to find out more about how their writing partnership works.

Writing can be a lonely occupation unless you happen to find someone who is on the same wavelength to share the journey. For Andy Lord and Phil Collinge, who have been friends for 20 years, writing comedy together seemed to make perfect sense. I asked how the writing collaboration evolved: "Mainly through drunken conversations and a shared sense of humour!" said Phil. "We watched a lot of the same stuff on TV and got to thinking that maybe we could do it.

"We wrote our first collaborative comedy in 1981 whilst still at school - a 'This Is Your Life' sketch for a school revue." Andy revealed. "It was an initially enjoyable process which due to some of our friends' inability to keep things secret, introduced us to the dubious joy of the re-write, the re-re write and finally the re-re re-write." The duo hadn't worked in television previously, but Phil affirms their qualifications to write: "We had both learned how to write our names in joined up letters and we each owned a TV, so the basics were in place."

"We had both written material for various work/college shows, but neither of us had taken things any further." Andy continues. "Our dream of getting things published/broadcast came at a much later date. It was probably around 1993 when we made the decision to venture into the world of comedy writing proper and actually started the demoralising process of submitting our work to producers and the like."

Together, the writers work on a comprehensive range of material to include comedy sketches for television and radio, stand-up routines, quiz show

ideas, children's programming, situation comedy and even film screenplays. Phil explains what's involved: "Ideas are easy really. Sometimes you have a brief to write to, if not then it's a question of setting yourself one - maybe saying to yourself: 'I'm going to write a sketch in a train station,' or 'I'm going to write about two middle-aged men who still argue with the sophistication of eight-year-olds.' What is difficult is finding the markets for your work. In the early days we sent a lot of work to a lot of places before we started to get noticed!" Andy adds: "Yes, I still have the reams of rejection letters to back this up." Despite this, the comedy team persevered and have gone on to place plenty of material

"It's very important that we respect each other's views and that we don't stamp our feet when things get edited."

ANDY LORD

When asked about whether they share an office or worked together on an informal basis, Phil says: "Definitely informal! Occasionally we do work face to face, but it's a painful process. We find it easier to get together and plot out the story, then go away and write our own bits separately. Then we put it all together and work jointly on what we've got. Sketches are often written independently, but based on shared conversations, and then script edited by the other. Of course we've known each other for so long now that we can write material separately which we know will appeal to the other."

"It is not unknown for us to write sketches separately," Andy continues, "only to find that we have used the same joke - then it's a 'Mexican stand-off' deciding whose version to submit."

Are two heads better than one when it comes to writing comedy? According to Phil: "As long as they are on two separate bodies, yes. It helps to be able

to bounce ideas off each other, also you can sometimes overcome writer's block and see weaknesses in scripts which may not be apparent to a solo writer who has been working on something for a while."

Andy adds: "We also have different 'strong suits' which come together nicely. Phil is more adept at writing dialogue, whereas my strength lies more in the visual and narrative side of things."

But there surely must be some conflict in the collaboration. "Very rarely!" Phil replies. "The Two Ronnies (Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett) used to say that they would never accept a sketch unless both of them thought it was good. It didn't matter that one of them thought it was the best thing they'd ever read; if the other wasn't convinced, the sketch was out. We tend to use a similar approach."

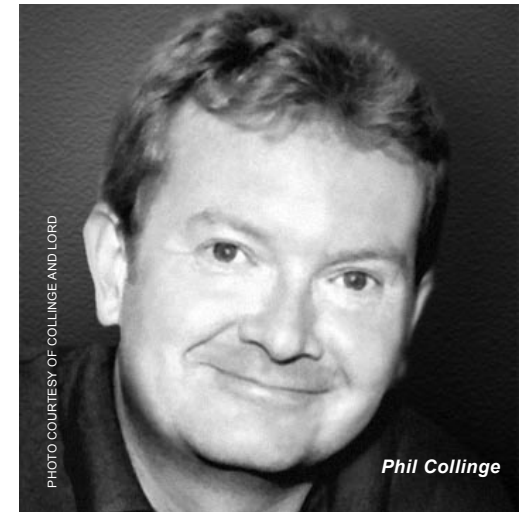
"It's very important that we respect each other's views and that we don't stamp our feet when things get edited out," says Andy. "We are also very aware that other people might not accept our work as being the finished article and we have to remain open to constructive criticism."

As all writers know; starting out is the most difficult time. "The first hurdle is finding the markets for your work and then getting past the slush piles," Phil comments. "But if you stick at it, you can see a pattern over time of 'rejection,' 'qualified rejection,' 'rejection but 'let's talk', and then 'success.' But it's a long road!"

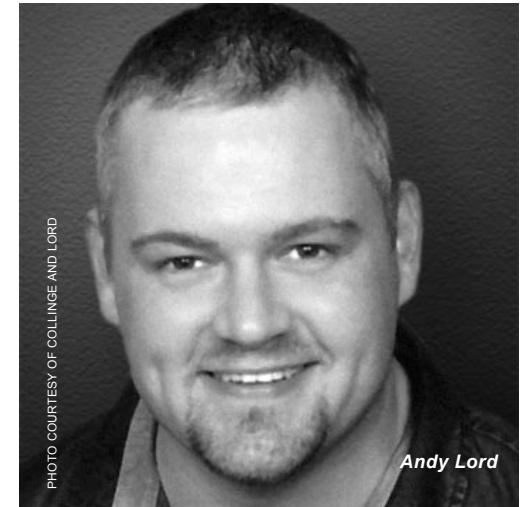
"Occasionally, one of us may have felt like we were banging our heads against a brick wall," Andy confirms, "but the other partner was always around to provide the encouragement to continue chasing our dream. In the early days we joined a couple of comedy writing societies who provided us with much needed market information - we still have contacts today that came via this route."

Phil adds, "Occasionally we would get positive or encouraging feedback, which really helps. You have to believe in yourself, but you also need other people to take you seriously so you know that you are not kidding yourself!"

The duo's first big break was, what Phil recalls, a rather X-rated sketch for a Freddie Starr show which was shown during primetime evening viewing. Andy



Phil Collinge



Andy Lord

remembers: "Yes, it was a little bit dodgy to say the least, but the sight of our names scrolling up in the credits spurred us on to achieve greater things."

The duo's client list includes the BBC, Carlton Television, Six Foot High Films, Red Door Productions and BBC Radio Scotland to name but a few, but how difficult is it to find fresh challenges? "Material is all around us, all the time, it is just a matter of storing the day-to-day things that we see, hear or imagine and applying them to the right project at the right time," says Andy.

- Continued Overleaf

- from previous page

"The difficulty is finding out who wants what and when; the internet is invaluable in this respect."

Phil agrees: "It's always been a mix of submitting our own ideas and working to other people's briefs. All our current projects are working to company briefs - this increases the chances of a positive end result somewhat!"

"If you have a sketch idea, write it and file it, don't sit and wait for a market."

PHIL COLLINGE

But what do they see as the 'bread and butter' work? Is it the quick sketches? "We have a big catalogue of sketches that we can draw on," Phil comments. "If you have a sketch idea, write it and file it, don't sit and wait for a market. We tend to use our catalogue for most of our sketch submissions these days. At the moment, we are busy on a pre-school children's television series, which if it comes off, will be a regular gig. Andy affirms the situation: "It is the sketch market that has provided us with our most regular sales, but as this seems to be a rapidly diminishing market, so we've focused our attention on larger scale projects. We have a couple of film screenplays and a two-hour comedy drama on the go. Hopefully these will enhance our CV and lead to similar projects in the future."

"Payment is based on the length of the sketch,"



JUST ANOTHER DAY AT THE OFFICE: Collinge and Lord were part of the extensive writing team for the BBC's TV *To Go*, a comedy sketch show featuring the talents of Hugh Dennis, Mina Anwar, Pauline McLynn, Debra Stephenson and Mackenzie Crook. (PHOTO COURTESY OF: BBC TELEVISION)

says Phil. "It can range from around £100 per minute down as low as £15 a minute, and of course you are only paid for what you sell, and there aren't that many markets in the UK."

"We've done a lot of work recently for European markets," says Andy. "This limits the range of material as we have to be conscious of cultural differences, and of course, clever word play is out of the question. But, as Phil rightly says, the market for sketches in the UK is very limited so we have to adapt."

To write good comedy, you need to know what has gone before and aspire to the comedy greats. Andy and Phil certainly have a long list. Phil began: "Ronnie Barker, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais. There is a certain style about their comedy, as well as being clever and funny, it's also mainstream and warm. Too much comedy today seems to be a cult experience aimed at a youth market. We like to think that our stuff will appeal to a whole range of ages and backgrounds, just like comedy used to be when we were growing up. Warmth is also an important factor, a lot of English comedy is about failure, but you've got to feel something for the characters even if they are not traditionally likeable. Hancock had it in the 50s and 60s, and Peter Kay has it now."

Andy agrees. "When repeats of *Dad's Army* draw larger audiences than new comedy shows you have to think that Jimmy Perry and David Croft had got the formula right. Too many shows these days try to appeal to the youth market by employing star names and using shock tactics. We try to write comedy that everyone can relate to - new and innovative is not necessarily funny."

On a specific formula for writing comedy, Phil comments: "It's one of those things you shouldn't try to analyse. You can't learn to be funny, but you can learn techniques of presentation, like making sure a pay-off line finishes with the funny bit at the end of the sentence, allowing comedy to come out

"We often find that material that didn't quite work as a sketch can be used as part of a longer project."

ANDY LORD

of the situation rather than being artificially bolted on, etc. My advice would be to watch comedy, read comedy and of course drink comedy!"

But what about the challenge of writing? Andy says: "It's a way of getting good ideas down on paper quickly. Of course, not every sketch we write is saleable for many reasons, but we often find that material that didn't quite work as a sketch can be used as part of a longer project."

Phil adds: "In some ways it's quick and easy. You're in, get to the funnies and then end on a pay-off. But it can be daunting if you have set boundaries. Briefs like: 'must be set in a supermarket, involve no more than two people and a dog and be translated into Serbo-Croat' can be a bit limiting!"

On the right ingredients for writing successful comedy, Phil states: "Make it funny! Look at what works. For me that's believable - sympathetic characters and situations which have some relation to real life. I favour taking a slightly different slant on events. A lot of comedy revolves around the unexpected - be it a funny line or situation. It's following a situation to its illogical conclusion, really."

"We can be as clever and as sophisticated as we like," says Andy, "but if we don't find it funny then we can't expect other people to laugh. Make it real and make it funny." So how do the team see their work progressing? Features perhaps? "Yes definitely!" Phil replies. "In fact, that's the direction we're going in at the moment. We're working with a production company on a couple of feature length projects."

"The challenge of writing one and a half to two hours worth of material is one that is inspiring us at the moment," Andy continues. "The process of writing a film with a proper beginning, middle and end is in many ways restricting, yet extremely enjoyable. I'm looking forward to sitting with my popcorn listening to people laugh at our stuff - and of course, one of those little gold statues would look wonderful on my mantelpiece!"

Phil and Andy are currently working with Vision In Productions on several projects, each with named actors attached. "We are also developing a major series for pre-school children, and of course we will always have our sketch work to fall back on, as and when markets arise. To be honest, our immediate

plans involve going to the pub!"

"For research," Andy quickly adds, emphasising that it's just a coincidence that a lot of their stuff has pub scenes in it!

"Two people working together should be able to achieve more than one, but if there's no equal commitment, one could hold the other back."

PHIL COLLINGE

On tips for writers looking to form a writing collaboration, Phil says: "Agree where you both stand. You need to know who does what, especially if you both have different strengths to bring to the partnership. It's also very important to make sure that you both have the same level of commitment. Two people working together should be able to achieve more than one, but if there is not equal commitment, one could actually end up holding the other back. We have never had anything more than a verbal agreement to do 50 per cent of the work each for an equal share, but if you feel you need a written agreement, go for it."

"It might be obvious, but decide on what you want to write - be it comedy, travel guides, whatever - and stick to it," says Andy. "One thing may well lead on to another, but if one of you is busy completing a recipe for scones whilst the other is carefully crafting the perfect whodunit, things aren't going to work!"

Finally, what advice can they give to budding comedy writers? Andy: "If you truly believe your stuff is funny, keep at it. Comedy is a subjective thing and not everyone will get it, but eventually your material will land on the right desk at the right time." To which Phil adds: "Persevere, persevere, persevere. And if you give up on that, try doggedness instead. Watch as much comedy as you can and read script books. Make sure you are spending more time writing than you are visiting e-mail forums and asking copyright questions! And you can always visit our website (www.collingeandlord.co.uk); there are a few useful links for writers and a market information forum" ●