



smile, it might never happen

A Drama Documentary by Phil Collinge and Andy Lord

OVERVIEW

Les Dawson was one of the best loved comedians and television celebrities of the latter part of the 20th century. His Mother-In-Law jokes remain in the heart of the nation and his final Royal Variety Performance has gone down in history as one of the greatest ever - especially with the Royal family. Everyone loved his eloquent and well crafted monologues, whilst his famous piano recitals were always guaranteed to have the watching public roaring with laughter.

For a large part of the 1980's however - behind the carefully crafted friendly smile and his warm hearted persona - Les Dawson was experiencing the 'tears of a clown'. From 1985 when Les almost lost his life to a failing prostate gland complicated by blood poisoning, up until the joyous birth of his daughter Charlotte Emily Lesley in 1992 the much loved comic genius experienced a living hell.

It is this little known period of his life that is the focus of our drama documentary. A period where Les lost Meg, his beloved wife of 25 years to cancer, battled with alcoholism and almost worked himself to an early grave to placate the tax man. A period when he came under the unwanted glare of the tabloid media after finding new love in the form of Tracy - 17 years his junior, when he worked relentlessly to rebuild his waning popularity and when he recovered from a debilitating heart attack which almost took his life before he had the chance to marry his new love.

Using a main cast of two and with limited locations; we witness how Les confronted all of these issues and setbacks and how he was finally rewarded with the birth of his beautiful daughter.

Smile It Might Never Happen is a story of a modest man battling with his inner demons and is, at times, thought provoking, insightful and tear-jerking but never loses touch with the dry, pessimistic and unique humour which was the heartbeat of one of Lancashire's most loved sons.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Les Dawson - Throughout most of the piece, Les is a man wracked with a combination of guilt, unhappiness, self-loathing and despair. Although he is constantly fighting these emotions, he remains forever the clown and his outlook of "Well, what was life but a theme for quips" wins the heart of his new love Tracy. Although the actor chosen to portray Les should have a passing resemblance to him, it is his ability to portray a man smiling through the face of adversity that remains most important.

Tracy Dawson - Initially a friendly barmaid at Les's favourite St Annes hotel and an outlet for her future husband to air his woes, Tracy slowly found herself falling in love with Les. When her first marriage broke up, Les and Tracy became lovers despite the 17 year age gap - much to the delight of media hacks across the country. A tireless charity worker, Tracy became the catalyst that brought Les out of his shell and back in to the limelight where he belonged.

STORY OUTLINE

The opening credits roll and are accompanied by the tune 'Smile Though Your Heart Is Aching' played on the piano in a typically 'Dawsonesque' manner - i.e. brilliantly badly. We then see a series of short archive clips of Les performing in his early days as a stand up comedian intercut with shots of audiences laughing. The quick cuts are edited together to indicate the passage of time, therefore the fashions and production quality of the clips lead us from the early seventies right up to the mid eighties. The clips feature some of Les's classic gags and oneliners such as the following:

I went to my doctor and asked for something for persistent wind. He gave me a kite.

I saw six men kicking and punching the mother-in-law. My neighbour said "Are you going to help?" I said "No, Six should be enough."

My wife is a sex object - every time I ask for sex, she objects.

I don't have to do this for a living...I just do it for the luxuries like bread and shoes.

The wife's Mother said, "When you're dead, I'll dance on your grave." I said: "Good, I'm being buried at sea."

My mother-in-law had to stop skipping for exercise...It registered 7 on the Richter scale.

I used to sell furniture for a living. The trouble was...it was my own.

In awe I watched the waxing moon ride across the zenith of the heavens like an ambered chariot towards the ebon void of infinite space wherein the tethered belts of Jupiter and Mars hang forever festooned in their orbital majesty. And as I looked at all this I thought...I must put a roof on this lavatory.

Funny thing how you first meet the woman that you marry. I first met the wife in a tunnel of love. She was digging it.

The series of clips end with a particularly cruel joke about Les's wife and cuts to a close up of an audience member laughing heartily. This joyful image then dissolves to one of Les (Our Actor) looking glassily into the distance with an expression of extreme sorrow.

We pull back to reveal that Les is slumped at the bar in the St Ives Hotel, Lythm St Annes. He is accompanied by a half empty bottle of scotch and an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. There is a tear in his eye and more heartless one liners about his wife cross his mind, for example:

I was sat in the garden the other day reading my marriage certificate...I was looking for a loophole.

Alas, the wife's had to give her job up. She's got rheumatism in her shoulder and can't throw the harpoon properly.

I took the wife out the other day...I take her everywhere, it saves kissing her goodbye.

As we hear the thoughts of Les, his face betrays the self-hatred that he is feeling at the moment and he drags disgustedly on another cigarette. He snaps out of it and smiles warmly as the barmaid, Tracy, approaches and enquires about Les' ailing wife. Les's expression tells her that the news is not good and she quickly changes the subject to his current appearance in a production of 'Babes In The Wood' in Manchester.

Les assumes his carefully manufactured warm and friendly demeanour and delivers the line:

I do get the odd smile from the audience, but it's usually wind.

His face relaxes into one that portrays his anxiety, and he gulps on his whisky. Tracy smiles warmly and takes the glass from his hand. Fade to Black.

The next scene opens with a close shot of a floral tribute with a card from Buckingham Palace which reads: 'PLEASE ACCEPT MY DEEPEST CONDOLENCES ON YOUR VERY SAD LOSS. PHILIP'. A caption states: 'Meg Dawson, wife of 25 years. Died Tuesday 15th April 1986'.

The scene continues with Les slouched unhappily at the hotel bar, Tracy is positioned opposite and they chat warmly about their troubles - Tracy's marriage is going through a rocky spell and she is having difficulties with her children Samantha and Richard. Les talks about his regular vigils to Meg's graveside and that despite the six months since her death, he can't stop thinking about her. He berates himself about how he is a poor father to his own children - Julie, Pamela and Stuart - and he voices his concern that his popularity is on the slide despite an acclaimed tour of 'Run For Your Wife' with Eric Sykes. As Les stands to leave the bar, Tracy gently squeezes his hand and they exchange a look that is an indication of things to come.

We cut to another day in the bar and Les is obviously intoxicated although markedly better groomed and wearing smarter clothes. He looks wistfully along the bar for Tracy who is nowhere to be seen. The background noise suggests a busy bar area and we hear a group approach and plead with Les to tell a joke (all off camera). Les steels himself and adopts his public countenance before turning to camera and delivering the line:

A man looked into the shaving mirror and saw a small tree growing on his cheek-bone. He wiped some shaving soap off his chin and saw a little stream running from his ear to his mouth, and halfway down the stream was a bridge with a milkmaid on it, and the sun on the man's forehead was shining down on a basket of flowers that the milkmaid was carrying towards a cottage nestling under his lip. The man went to see the doctor and the doctor said: "Don't worry over it...it's a beauty spot".

Les, pleased that he has satisfied his public, slides gingerly off his bar stool and heads for the door. As he approaches it, Tracy walks through and they exchange a knowing glance for a few moments before Tracy angrily challenges him:

You look a mess! If you're trying to kill yourself then you are making a damn good job of it!

We next find Les in a theatre dressing room obviously surrounded by other cast members, (Les is in a production of 'Babes In The Wood' in Birmingham) and they are all drinking heavily. After a short while Les picks up a phone to speak to Tracy. The phone call turns nasty however with Tracy chastising Les for drinking and Les arguing back with equal enthusiasm.

The call ends with Tracy insisting that Les never calls her again. Les slams down the phone, takes another slug of whisky and turns to his companions (off camera) declaring:

You see before you a man scorned, a man bereft of love. From this day forward, once a month a lady of my choice will ease my loins! Not for me the bondage of one woman's love - for me, only the pit of selfish desire, and ego doth drive me on.

The group voice their agreement before we hear the door opening and a voice declaring that there is a phone call for Mr Dawson - someone called Tracy. At this, Les downs his drink and dashes off, much to the amusement of the onlookers.

Some while later, back at the St Ives hotel bar Les is surprised to see Tracy there - she had planned to go on holiday with her husband and two children but reveals to Les that she simply did not want to go and that she had no idea why. Les smiles warmly and takes his usual position at the bar. As Les pulls a cigarette from the box, he catches sight of Tracy's disapproving look before shrugging slightly, winking and lighting the cigarette anyway.

In the next scene we see Les sat in near darkness on the edge of his bed. He is clutching a framed photograph of Meg, and tears are streaming down his face. His thoughts convey how much he loved Meg and that he feels completely confounded that he has feelings towards Tracy. He explains in his thoughts that Tracy has got divorced and how he wants to be with her. The scene ends with Les whispering:

We've both been unhappy - please, Meg, tell me that I have your blessing to love someone again...please.

We see a montage of tabloid front pages with headlines such as: 'Who is the mystery blonde in Les's life?', 'Off the wall Casanova', 'Carry on bonking', 'Les's lover on the town', etc.

Cut to Les in a different dressing room reading one of the newspapers - he looks angry. The irony of the paper's story and the fact that he is appearing in 'Run For Your Wife' is not lost on Les. We hear a man's voice calling for Les to go on stage. Les leaves the room, and as the camera pans around the theatre ephemera we hear Les's lines, distorted and obviously from the stage:

LES What's up old son?

PETER You don't understand, Stanley.

LES No, I damn well don't, with all the rubbish printed in the papers today. And when it comes to rubbish in the papers, by hell I know what I'm talking about.

We hear the audience roar their approval for Les's diversion from the script and an audience member can be heard shouting; 'Sod 'em...be happy!'

Next we find an excited Les and Tracy bursting in to Les's bedroom laden with suitcases and bags. Tracy recounts with disbelief how Les had dragged her from her private suite in the St Ives hotel and informing the night porter that she was going to live with Les and that they would announce their intention to marry. They are both extremely happy and hug as the scene fades.

We see a series of scenes with Les and Tracy enjoying their time with each other, and at one point they are enjoying watching an episode of 'Blankety Blank'. Things have taken a turn for the better and the couple appear blissfully happy throughout the scenes. It is now 1988 and Les ends the section by revealing how much he is looking forward to appearing at the Blackpool Opera House.

In the dressing room at the Opera House, Tracy looks extremely worried. Les is slumped in a chair looking very pale and grey. It is the show's interlude and Les insists that he is OK and that he is only suffering from indigestion. As Tracy calls for the theatre's doctor, Les can hardly keep his eyes open, and as the image begins to blur we hear some of Les's lines fade in and out of the scene as Les loses consciousness:

Good evening. May I say what a thrill it is to be in Blackpool - which as you know is Morecambe with 'O' levels.

It's so healthy here - that fresh air - a mixture of ozone and chip fat.

Les has suffered a heart attack. In the next scene we find Les recuperating at home in bed, Tracy is by his side and they discuss his recovery. As Les reaches for some cigarettes, Tracy berates him and emphasises what the doctor's have said about Les's smoking and drinking. Les reveals his undying love for Tracy and promises to quit the fags and ease up on the whisky. He intends to be around for their impending marriage on Tracy's birthday 6th May 1989.

We see another montage of images, this time happy memories and photographs of the happy couple on their wedding day. We hear part of Les's wedding speech over the photos.

Tracy and I have had a slight disagreement. I've gone to a hell of a lot of trouble to book a caravan for her honeymoon... Would you believe she doesn't want to go in a caravan? She wants to come to the South of France with me.

The story takes a farcical turn as Les and Tracy discuss having a baby; Les is convinced that the overweight, smoking lush couldn't possibly father a child. They decide that Les should go for tests and we subsequently witness a laughing and deliriously happy couple recounting Les's harrowing experience at a clinic where he is asked to provide a sample. Les's delivery of the tale, in the privacy of their bedroom, has Tracy in hysterics and we share their excitement as it is revealed that they should have no problems conceiving naturally.

Things are finally looking brighter for Les and his career takes off again with job offers begin to flood in. We see a clip from 'Opportunity Knocks' with Les as presenter, A scene from the acclaimed BBC2 film 'Nona' where Les plays a woman! and a brief clip of 'Fast Friends'.

Unfortunately the press, seizing the opportunity to pillory Les once more, pour scorn over the critically panned 'Fast Friends' and Les suffers a crisis of confidence one more. He is invited to appear on the bill for the Royal Variety Performance in 1991 but feels that his best days are behind him and despite Tracy's attempts to convince him otherwise Les declines the offer. It is only when Les discovers that HRH the Duke of Edinburgh has personally requested that he performs does Les relent and agree to do the gig.

We see Tracy watching his performance on television and we close on her proud expression as we hear some of Les's gags bringing the house down:

It's wonderful to be appearing here in this marvellous old theatre, such an intimate atmosphere...it reminds me of home...it's filthy and full of strangers.

I've never forgotten the last time I appeared on the Royal Variety Show...it was a triumph, a tour de force...a night to remember. Her Majesty the Queen sat in the royal box and she wore a radiant smile on her face throughout my act...and Prince Albert fell about.

Les's act over-ran by eight minutes but no-one cared. The press, so often an irritation to Les, claimed that he had been the 'Show Stealer' - life was good.

We see Les stumbling into yet another theatre dressing room - echoes of tumultuous applause can be heard in the background - he falls into Tracy's arms. The screen fades to black and we hear the unmistakable sounds of a speeding ambulance. We hear Les's thoughts as the ambulance speeds towards its destination:

You bloody fool... you were given another chance, and what have you done?

We also hear the voice of a doctor telling Tracy to prepare for the worst as Les might not make it.

It is now New Year 1992 and Les is recovering from his latest close encounter. Les's lungs were almost full with fluid and if it wasn't for the emergency team that attended the Wimbledon theatre that night, Les would have surely suffered a massive heart attack. Tracy reminds him of the facts as she tends to him in his bed back at Garth House, Lythm St Annes. A number of appropriate Dawson one liners fill the air as we watch Tracy dutifully tend to her husband:

I've just come out of hospital...hospital, that's an abattoir with splints.

I had a really old fashioned doctor, when he lanced a boil he did it on horseback.

The images of Tracy caring for Les dissolve in to ones of Les worriedly caring for Tracy as she now lays ill in bed. Despite Tracy's initial reluctance, Les persuades her to attend the hospital for a series of tests. They leave the room fearing the worst.

When we next see the couple, they are full of joy and dance around the bedroom. The tests only confirmed what they had not dare hope for - Tracy was Pregnant.

The penultimate scenes of the piece see Les 'walking on air' and looking visibly younger as the day of their daughter's birth approaches. The couple are clearly enjoying the prospect of being parents as one short scene after another, paint a picture of complete happiness and are accompanied by an appropriately upbeat tune.

The final scene sees Les with tears in his eyes holding his baby, Charlotte Emily Lesley Dawson, in his arms. His face is one of total contentment as he gently cradles his daughter. Tracy wraps a loving arm around them both as Les gently kisses the baby's forehead and whispers:

This clown will cry no more.

The screen slowly dissolves to black and a simple caption reads: 'On the 10th June 1993, eight months after the birth of his beloved daughter - Charlotte Emily Lesley - Les Dawson died of a heart attack. This clown will cry no more.'

PRODUCTION NOTES

As the programme makes use of archive clips and employs merely two main characters and a limited number of sets, the drama documentary will be reasonably inexpensive to produce.

Most of the action takes place in the hotel bar at the St Ives hotel in Lytham St Annes, in Theatre dressing rooms or in Les and Tracy's home (Garth House) although to keep production costs to a minimum, these could easily be studio sets.

As in any dramatised piece, a certain amount of artistic licence will be utilised and some of the events, dates, times and places will not necessarily be historically accurate. Having said this, the writers - Phil Collinge and Andy Lord - will attempt to remain true (as far as is possible) to actual events and avoid any fabrication which could possibly cause offence to the Dawson family.

When the main characters are perceived to be addressing other characters - regaling the hotel bar clientele for example - these will be filmed as 'direct into camera' pieces and the actor's facial expressions and reactions will be enough to give the sense that there are others present.

The whole piece will be very intimate in nature in order to give the viewer some indication of how Les or Tracy is feeling at any given moment. Tight shots, moody lighting and subtle music will add to the feeling of intimacy.

SELLING POINTS

June 2008 will mark the 15th anniversary of Les Dawson's death and this programme will provide a fitting tribute to one of the UK's favourite comedians and television personalities.

Les Dawson never once considered leaving his adopted home town of Lytham St Annes and was a standard bearer for Lancashire life - he even had a running argument with the Duke of Edinburgh over the correct way to cook black pudding! - and as such is an ideal candidate for a Granada regional television production.

Drama documentaries have a proven history of success, and 'Made In Manchester' are developing a strong reputation in this area of popular history programming.