

# IN CONVERSATION WITH CLIVE ANDERSON



Josie Lawrence, Brad Sherwood, Clive Anderson, Colin Mochrie and Greg Proops at the Adelphi Theatre in 2015.

**W**hen Clive Anderson presented the very first episode of *Whose Line is it Anyway?* on Radio 4, he was working as a full-time criminal barrister. Fifteen years into his career, Anderson hung up his barrister's wig when his television career took off – first, as the gregarious host of *Whose Line* (an initial six episode stint on Radio 4 turned into a ten year run on Channel 4) and next when he helmed his very own prime-time chat show. For a short time, the two very distinct professional worlds Anderson inhabited crossed paths and, much to his surprise, had more similarities than he first thought.

"You've got to be confident in court and cope with the judges being annoying, which is of

course similar to television which has its own wind-ups, problems and things threatening to go horribly wrong," Anderson laughs, explaining that the skills he developed in the courtroom – especially when responding to unplanned situations quickly and in dealing with manifold personalities – came in useful on a show where everything was entirely unplanned.

The brainchild of Dan Patterson and Mark Leveson, *Whose Line* was an instant hit with critics and viewers thanks to the relatively simple premise of placing a group of talented improvisers into hilarious fictional situations and moments – none of which they knew beforehand. For many, being such a controller of chaos may seem terrifying; for Anderson,

thriving in chaos is what he enjoyed the most about working on the show – and in the courtroom.

"I think improvisation is such an interesting area. On panel shows, obviously everything is very controlled. But with improvisation, there's an element of the unpredictable and I always think those are the best bits, where things go off in a direction that nobody had quite planned. Some people don't like the unstructured feel to it and the fact it's a bit shambolic around the edges, but it has to be for it to work so well."

As a presenter, Anderson won praise for his quick-wit and razor-sharp responses, not least with show regular Greg Proops, who often comically sparred with Anderson during each episode. "Greg and I always used to do a lot of bickering and bantering with each other. When it's a television studio, you don't quite know if a certain element is going to be in the programme or whether it's just to entertain the audience.

Anderson's foray into comedy began much earlier than his work as a barrister. Whilst studying law at Cambridge, Anderson fell into a student comedy collective that included the likes of Douglas Adams and Griff Rhys Jones. He became the president of Footlights in 1974, wrote comedic scripts for other entertainers and even tried stand-up himself before finding his feet presenting a radio show which caught the attention of Dan Patterson.



Back: Paul Merton, Richard Vranich, Clive Anderson, Tony Slatterly  
Front: Jim Sweeney, Steve Steen



Clive Anderson

"I think I was very lucky when *Whose Line* went from radio to television as it was fairly early days for Channel 4. They were quite imaginative and open to new ideas and decided to stick with the guy who had already done the job on the radio. In another time, they might have said 'Let's get somebody who's already well-established on the television to present it' – as it was, they were looking for new stuff and wanted to be different, so it made sense for them to somehow have me. I was lucky and somehow fell on my feet."

Such was the show's popularity that it resulted in making household names of its cast and host. "It's easier to import somebody who has already got a name than it is to create your own stars," Anderson says. "People like Colin Mochrie, Ryan Stiles, Josie Lawrence, Tony Slattery – they might not have had a particularly high profile following when they began, but they got their own following for themselves and the show. It built its own loyal following."

Despite winning a Comedy Award for 'Top Entertainment Presenter' for his hosting abilities in 1991, Anderson frequently plays down his own role in the show's success. "I hope I contributed something," he says in a half-comedic, half-self-deprecating tone. "I suppose in some respects I'm a slightly random element for the improvisers. I'm just there to make it harder for them but in turn it really shows off their excellent skills even more."

"I like to think that I ultimately help out. I provide a punctuation point so that the improvisers can react to me and give me a hard time if I've given them a bad suggestion," Anderson says, explaining his role more. "I think it's all part of the fun. It may be not everyone on the show thinks that, but I'm there to be the authority figure than they can object to and react to – and I enjoy that. They're probably fuming most of the time that I'm making it even more difficult for them, or stopping them just before they're

about to deliver the funniest line ever!"

The games were all devised by the show's creators but in the early days, Anderson also helped. "If you ask them, they'll probably say I have helped with ideas but that I irritate them making suggestions," he laughs. "When we first did the show on the radio, it was a much tighter, leaner organisation. Dan and Mark used to come over to my house, have a cup of tea and a slice of toast and we'd sit down and have a nice, jolly conversation about what we were going to do. As soon as it went to television, you have all sorts of people and my role was sadly diminished. That's probably a good thing," he chortles, "I always bow to them."

When chatting about his favourite memories of the show, there are many, but it's the sketches combining music and comedy that Anderson admires the most. "The improvisers on the show are excellent....Josie Lawrence can make



Ryan Stiles, Mike McShane



Clive Anderson, Ryan Stiles, Colin Mochrie, Brad Sherwood, Greg Proops

up a song about anything – she has a fabulous singing voice and can make up a song off hand that could easily be a part of a musical. I'm always impressed on a personal level with people singing as well as doing comedy."

"I love the hoedowns but I'm not sure the performers like it as it's so disciplined – you have to obviously hit the gag on a beat. It's very hard on the person that goes first as they have got hardly any time to think of anything; the one who goes last has to think of something better than the other three." Another highlight, he explains, is Colin Mochrie's concentration face. "It's an absurd thing to like I know," he says, breaking down with laughter. "But during the stage shows, he is the full and perfect encapsulation of the part he is playing and is always fantastic to watch."

After ten years on Channel 4, *Whose Line* ventured overseas to the US and then back

to the UK via a series of theatre shows. Now, the show returns to the stage to celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Anderson thinks the anniversary shows will be very special. "I think people will enjoy the pace, the chaos and the whole extraordinariness of what we have planned," Anderson smiles. What can fans expect? "We will have a number of old and new games and tasks, familiar faces from the show and the excellent musical accompaniments of Laura Hall and Linda Taylor too."

What does Anderson make of the milestone and the reunion himself? "I've compared it to being in an ageing rock-group that reunites, like The Rolling Stones or something. My fellow improvisers won't welcome me for saying that – some of them aren't that old – it's lovely when people reminisce and say things like 'oh I was young and stayed up late to watch the show'...but the worst thing – the worst thing – is when they say 'Oh – I don't remember it but

my grandmother told me it was a really great programme that she used to enjoy'..."

Age worries aside, it's clear Anderson can't wait for the chaos to ensue. "The audience love it when something completely off the wall or new happens," Anderson laughs. "And so do I."

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**By Elizabeth Aubery**  
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