

THE GUARDIAN  
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# Scarlett's new fever

## Television

### Nancy Banks-Smith

**T**HE MOMENT Scarlett vomited into the commode, we knew, quick as a flasher, we were in for one of those noisy childbirths so prevalent in costume drama.

And pretty soon, shrieking a treat, she was lashed to the kitchen table for a Caesarian while her old Irish granny brandished a bloodstained knife.

Olivia de Havilland's labour throes in *Gone With The Wind* ("Scream Melanie!") put the more sensitive off sex for most of the war.

Scarlett (Sky) is a TV sequel to the film. Four nights, eight hours and not a moment's magic among them.

Joanne Whalley-Kilmer fiddle-de-dees prettily as Scarlett. Timothy Dalton wears a selection of wide-awake hats which seem, like the character of Rhett, rather too large for him and, tonight, John Gielgud, makes his customary short but forceful appearance. (Unless he is

lashed to a table and threatened with a bloodstained knife, Gielgud seems happy to accept any part offered. Half a horse in a pantomime, as long as it's the back half and he gets to sit down a bit.)

Last night Scarlett visited a number of huffy relatives and left in a marked manner after a row. Rather like Christmas, really. The little gem was Sarah Crowe (you know, the girl who's so fond of cheese) just zinging away as a fluffy-headed whore.

However, if you like melodrama with knobs on, things cheer up considerably tonight when Scarlett, pregnant but not too strong on obstetrics ("The ace is up my sleeve now"), returns to the old sod.

The British are being brutal to the Irish (this bit should go down well in Boston) but none as brutal as Sean Bean ("Actually I'm the Earl of Fenton"). Not only does he smoke in bed, he stubs out his cigarette on his mistress. There is a bottled menace about Bean here like a petrol bomb in a crate of ginger pop.

Antony Thomas, a unique filmmaker, can often be relied upon to stir things up as with a spoon. After

Death Of A Princess, I remember seeing him sitting not in an office but in the corridor, as if the high tide of outrage was carrying him and desk out of the door.

Between Life And Death (Central) asked if heaven was a hallucination. People close to death seem to share sensations which transform their lives. A brilliant, loving light ("I was taken up in the arms of God and cuddled like a newborn baby") and a floating sensation ("As if you were to walk outside tonight and gravity let go and you just flew").

The scientific explanation is that a sudden drop in blood pressure produces endomorphins, which induce quiet or delight.

It is comforting how many feel they are going up. My particular favourite was Ronald Reagan, a crook who went to hell.

Heavens, no. Another Ronald Reagan.

Close to death he saw old friends burning in a lake of fire. "One died in a robbery attempt in Atlanta. He didn't hardly know where he was, he was so high."

And he really didn't get any money, just wine. And he came out of the store with a gun that didn't have any bullets in it. We were in the automobile waiting on him and the guy that ran the liquor store walked out behind him and literally blew his heart out the front of his chest.

"He fell around the parking meter, broken glass and wine and blood and he cried 'Oh, God!' And he was screaming 'Don't come here! There's no way out!'"

Ron, a brand snatched from the burning, is a preacher now in the dirt-poor, beautiful mountains of Tennessee where there is no way out but up.

TV contracts, dog food ads, Raleigh chopper japes, Tampax titters, and all enveloped in a cardy and slippers image. Is comedy really the new rock'n'roll? Maybe not

# Laugh? I really tried

## Lyn Gardner

**T**HERE are few sadder sights than the comedy addict in search of a quick fix. It's Friday night at the London Comedy Festival and the atmosphere is getting desperate. The solo show by Aussie Mark Little, a man who has escaped the curse of Ramsay Street only to fall into the clutches of *The Big Breakfast*, is sold out. Activity in the bar resembles the closing stages of a Monopoly game: "Look, I'll swap you one Mark Little for two Emilio Marchetti and I'll throw in a Mark Hurst." "Mark Hurst? I don't think I've seen him on television."

Don't bet on it. There are very few acts in Riverside's Comedy Festival who haven't made it on the box. Even in the twilight wolds of Riverside's Studios 2 and 3, people you've only just heard of and hope never to hear of again are plugging their TV slots, books, tapes and T-shirts. "Did you see me on the Jack Dee show?" "I'm very big on Tyne Tees TV," is the refrain. Sadsters, I think.

It wasn't so long ago that comics were grateful for a microphone that worked, a few quid cash in hand and a chance to vent their spleen on Mrs Thatcher. Now it's all dressing rooms, personal managements and TV contracts. With the notable exception of Eddie Izzard, becoming a stand-up is now a smart career move, a step on the ladder to appearing on the Des O'Connor show, presenting fantasy football or doing voice-overs for dog food. After all, who in their right mind wants to spend any more time than is necessary in the smoky upstairs rooms of suburban pubs being heckled, when you can so easily be enjoying BBC hospitality and sitting near Angus Deayton on *Have I Got News For You*?



Jack Dee... from grumps stand-up to campy widgets

This surely explains why at the Riverside so many sets by up-and-coming comics resemble audition spots with the performer focusing one eye on the audience and the other on a TV contract. There's about as much sense of danger as there is negotiating a zebra crossing with the help of a lollipop man. Just as auditioning actors give their Hamlet or their Richard III, so the Riverside stand-ups offer their John Wayne Bobbit joke, their reminiscences of a seventies childhood (Raleigh choppers and the Bay City Rollers) and, if they're female, their joke about the thoughtfulness of Tampax manufacturers in providing the instructions "Insert into vagina" in 10 different languages. So useful for holiday romances.

After 48 hours at the Comedy Festival I began to wonder whether, just as all taramasalata appears to emanate from the same Magmix in Green Lane, whether all jokes used by stand-ups are the product of a factory somewhere in Broadcasting House. Or maybe they just all buy the same Christmas crackers.

The real issue here is the complete lack of issues. The material is non-racist, non-sexist, non-political, and completely non-threatening. It is comedy that cannot see beyond its own punching, stand-up that stands up for nothing.

True there are exceptions. Unlike most, Jeremy Hardy on Saturday night looked further than hangovers, turning 30 and sexual insecurities, scoring direct hits on the Government, the Labour Party, the NHS and organised religion. But even the savagery of his satire is wrapped up in a cosy cardie-and-slippers image. Mandy Knight's impression of Natalie Wood drowning is probably not quite what the producer of the Des O'Connor Show is looking for, but Knight's carefully calculated offensiveness is entirely purposeless be-



Rhona Cameron... I'm more together than I seem'

# Townes and country guru

Townes van Zandt, the original country slacker, lights up the Edinburgh Assembly Rooms

## Bob Flynn

**T**HESE days a Townes van Zandt concert is akin to the experience of touring the ruins of a lost wonder of the musical world, a sad yet elevating experience. A country-blues guru for 39 years, a near-genius songwriter and the original slacker, van Zandt carries the personalised wreckage of life into his songs.

Revered by the likes of Steve Earle — who once said that he was prepared to stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table and proclaim van Zandt as the greatest songwriter alive — through to the new kids, Tindersticks and The Cowboy Junkies, with his songs covered by everyone from Nanci Griffith to Willie Nelson, he remains at the sideroads of fame, courting a life of bottles and break-ups, not commercialism.

If the three-bottle-a-day stories are true, he makes Shane MacGowan look like Basil Hume, and it is amazing that he even made it to this last date of his European tour at the Assembly Rooms. As it was he just about made it to his on-stage chair and it was obvious that the legend of this holy drinker was not exaggerated.

A long, rangy string of a man, he seemed half wasted and lurched from rambling jokes that made him ecstatically happy to songs that ached with a suicidal despair.

Like Hank Williams before

him, the original country god on self-destruct mode, he is someone speaking straight from the soul, the truth twanging out at you. If anyone ever pulled the idea of country as the white blues, it is him.

Far removed from the tinselly troubles of the MTV cowboys, van Zandt is the real thing and the scars, emotional and otherwise, are so evident it is sometimes hard to watch.

"Sometimes you just give up, you know," he told the sellout crowd and, remembering that he is often years off the road and out of the recording studios when the manic holders and depressions get hold, it looked like he might walk, or fall, off at any moment.

But he carried on, the voice a dry, cracked parchment singing songs that came like brilliant shafts of light out of muddled clouds.

From his new album, his first in nearly a decade, Marie was one of the hardest, loneliest songs I have heard and a sudden dazzling burst of Lightnin' Hopkins-style blues-picking on *Gone Down To Memphis* highlighted the immense talent below the alcoholic haze.

He ended up meandering into a Woody Guthrie sing-along and then faded very quickly into his own confusion. During all this I had the tragic vision of Garth Brooks's limo, purring towards another megabowl extravaganza while Townes van Zandt, with his battered guitar case, tried to hitch a ride.

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