



John Inman as Mr. Humphries in *Are You Being Served?*. Undated BBC publicity photo.

Inman, John (1935-2007)

by Linda Rapp

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Acclaimed comic actor John Inman gained international fame for his endearing portrayal of the fey salesman Mr. Humphries on the television series *Are You Being Served?*. He was also a perennial favorite on the pantomime circuit in Britain, specializing in traditional "dame" roles in which he appeared in drag.

John Inman grew up in Lancashire in northwest England. His parents were hairdressers and owned several shops in Preston, where Inman was born on June 28, 1935. About a decade later the family moved to the seaside town of Blackpool, where they ran a boardinghouse.

As a small child, Inman enjoyed making costumes and putting on little shows for his neighbors. As a schoolboy, he was an enthusiastic participant in plays. "I had a headmaster who was sensible. He knew that acting was what I was going to do with my life, so when the town's professional theater needed a boy and got in touch with the school, they got me," Inman recalled.

With his stage debut at thirteen, Inman had found his calling. He quit school two years later and began doing whatever he could--"sweeping up, making tea, moving scenery"--at the theater.

To support himself, Inman became a window-dresser at a menswear store in Blackpool. After two years, however, he moved to Britain's capital since "even the shows done in Blackpool were cast in London."

He found another window-dressing job at a Regent Street store, but acting opportunities were scarce until a fellow employee, Kenneth Kendall (who later became well known as a newsreader on British television), invited him to join a touring company.

Inman, then 21, began as a scenic artist but soon returned to the stage. He found the work in repertory valuable because "in repertory you find out what you're best at. You play parts you're dead wrong for--and parts you're dead right for. All of a sudden, I became the funny man of the company. Fine with me. I like the sound of laughter."

Inman was also making a name for himself in pantomime, musical shows usually based on fairy tales. Inman specialized in traditional dame roles, memorably teaming with drag artist Barry Howard as the "Ugly Sisters" in productions of *Cinderella*. The two of them sewed their own costumes of outrageous design and color combinations. They performed together in pantomime until Inman was cast in *Are You Being Served?*.

It was, however, "a long time before I became a full-time working actor," stated Inman, who held on to the window-dressing job while establishing himself in his career.

He made it to London's West End in 1969, performing in the musical comedy *Ann Veronica* (book by Frank Wells, based on a novel by H.G. Wells; music by Cyril Ornadel, lyrics by David Croft).

The following year he made his first television appearance as a guest on the series *Two in Clover*.

In the spring of 1972 David Croft and Jeremy Lloyd created *Are You Being Served?* as an episode of the BBC series *Comedy Playhouse*. Croft tapped Inman to play Mr. Humphries, the role that would make him a star.

Set in the fictional Grace Brothers department store, the bawdy comedy featured the antics and misadventures of the eccentric but appealing sales staff in the mens- and womenswear departments. The pilot, which aired in September 1972, was a great hit, and Croft and Lloyd sought to turn it into a regular series.

BBC officials recognized that the show was a winner, but one reportedly voiced an objection: "All right, you can do it, but I don't want the poof in it," to which Croft is said to have replied, "Without the poof, there's no series. Mr. Humphries is the funniest character." Viewers ratified that opinion (if not necessarily the expression of it): in 1976 Inman was voted the Funniest Man on Television by readers of the *TV Times* and was also chosen BBC TV Personality of the Year.

With Mr. Wilberforce Clayborne Humphries still on the Grace Brothers staff, *Are You Being Served?* began its highly successful run as a series in 1973 and remained on the air in Britain until 1985.

Camp and fey, sweet-natured and charming, the Mr. Humphries character became known for warbling the signature line "I'm free!" while mincing his way to serve a customer by measuring the gentleman's inside leg.

Mr. Humphries' speech was replete with sexual innuendo, but there was no specific reference to his sexual orientation. Actress Wendy Richard, who played the junior saleswoman, Miss Brahms, commented, "It was never stated that he was gay, merely that he was nice to his mother"--whom he occasionally played. Although the word was never uttered (a fact that itself testifies to the reticences of the time), it was impossible for viewers not to conclude that Mr. Humphries was a gay man.

Eventually Inman's portrayal of Mr. Humphries drew criticism from gay rights activists. In 1977 members of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality picketed a Brighton theater where Inman was appearing, decrying his depiction of Mr. Humphries in a way that reinforced stereotypical ideas about gay men. The protests continued even after *Are You Being Served?* went off the air.

In 2007 gay journalist Matthew Parris offered a different perspective. While acknowledging that the over-the-top and caricatured image of Mr. Humphries is one that "we need to shed" now, back in the 1970s, he said, performers like Inman "were a light in the dark. Between the words, these men insinuated a wordless language of their own; they made a non-verbal statement, a shyly comical way of saying: 'This is who and what I am; this is my tribe--and, look, I'm famous and life is fun.' To anxious boys like me, who didn't even know a tribe existed, the lives and careers of these men showed we were not alone."

Parris points out that, back in those days, "the people who wanted these men taken off the stage, screen, and wireless were not the gay-rights campaigners but the bigots and guardians of conservative morality." He noted that *Are You Being Served?* debuted at a time when "the idea that homosexuality might be an amusing, unthreatening, and not uncommon oddity rather than scary--a moral poison and a mortal sin--was gaining ground. Such portrayals unsoured what it was to be gay. The point about this version of the Gay Everyman, surely, was that he was likeable."

But Mr. Humphries was not only an immensely likable and endearing character, as portrayed by Inman he was also slyly subversive, illuminating the hypocrisies and absurdities of conventional British mores from an outsider's perspective and frequently puncturing the pretensions and snobberies of middle-class life.

Inman not only charmed viewers but also won the respect of his fellow performers. Richard, who remained

a lifelong friend, called him "one of the funniest and most inventive actors I have ever worked with." Mike Berry, who played Mr. Humphries' assistant during the last four seasons of the show, stated that Inman "was a confident comedian, which made him generous. He would help you in delivering a line to get the most out of it. He liked to work in a good team."

Indeed, the team on *Are You Being Served?* had great success. At the height of their popularity in the late 1970s, over 20 million British viewers were tuning in to the show. In 1977 the ensemble made a film (directed by Bob Kellett) also entitled *Are You Being Served?*. Inman also appeared in an Australian adaptation of the series in 1980-81.

The series found a new and enthusiastic audience when it was shown in the United States. Debuting on PBS in 1988, it quickly became a popular staple of the network. Inman was once again a fan favorite and made annual trips to America for interviews and public appearances, including frequently as a guest during public-television pledge drives, discussing the making of the show and responding to questions from viewers.

Because of the renewed interest in the original series, Lloyd and Croft wrote a sequel, *Grace and Favour* (U.S. title: *Are You Being Served? Again!*), that brought back five of the original cast members, including Inman, but transported them to a stately home that had been turned into a hotel. The new premise did not work as well as the first one, however, and the series had only a brief run in 1992-1993.

Since Mr. Humphries had been the vehicle for his success, Inman called him a "dear friend" and, he quipped, "extremely popular with my bank manager." Nevertheless, Inman was somewhat frustrated at being typecast afterward. Nicholas Smith, who played the often befuddled manager of Grace Brothers, recalled, "I once said to him, 'If I was casting, I would have you playing a peppery old colonel or a barrister--a completely different role.' He looked at me a bit sadly and said, 'Yes, but they won't let me, you know.'"

Inman had briefly been lured away from the BBC by ITV in 1977 to star in *Odd Man Out*, a situation comedy about a fish-and-chip shop owner who had inherited a factory. Unfortunately, the series suffered a swift cancellation. He later returned to television in the series *Take A Letter, Mr. Jones* (1981), playing a secretary, and he made numerous cameo appearances on other shows. He also had a supporting role in Stephen Cookson's comedy film *The Mumbo Jumbo* in 2000.

Most of Inman's later work was in the theater. He toured in his own show, *Fancy Free*, in the 1980s, as well as appearing in plays, often farces such as Sam Cree's *Pyjama Tops* (in 1982) and Derek Benfield's *Bedside Manners* (in 1988).

Inman was a perennial crowd-pleaser in pantomime and performed in more than forty shows. Danny La Rue, another pantomime dame, described Inman as "irreplaceable," saying, "John was wonderful in panto. The children adored him. He had a magic touch." Actress Rula Lenska, who also appeared in pantomime with Inman, praised his generosity: "He was a joy to work with, and even after an exhausting day in pantomime he would have time for the fans who crowded round the stage door."

Like many other actors of his own and earlier times, when an acknowledgement of homosexuality could not only spell the end of a career but possibly make them a target of criminal prosecution, Inman remained closeted for most of his life. He generally deflected questions about his romantic interests by calling the stage his love.

Sadly, as late as 1999, Inman felt the need to hide his sexual orientation, claiming that he had been in a romantic relationship with a woman--unnamed and unseen--for nearly thirty years, an assertion that was met with widespread incredulity.

Inman came out publicly only when he and builder Ron Lynch, with whom he had been together for 33 years, were united as civil partners on December 23, 2005.

Inman was in poor health in his last years. He was forced to abandon his role as Wanda the Cook in the pantomime *Dick Whittington* in December 2004 after contracting Hepatitis A, a disease caused by consumption of contaminated food. He remained weakened by the infection until his eventual death on March 8, 2007. He is survived by Lynch.

At news of his death, tributes poured in from professional colleagues, friends, and fans who praised Inman's work and recalled the joy that it had brought them, while members of glbtq rights organizations and other commentators offered their various opinions on his role in cultural history.

Mollie Sugden, often Inman's foil (and sometimes ally) as Mrs. Slocombe, the head of the womenswear department on *Are You Being Served?*--and another of the show's more transgressive characters--may have found the right words as she mourned Inman's passing: "It's a very sad day. As far as I'm concerned, it's the end of an era."

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