

'ANCOCK—BY TONY HANCOCK

In an interview with Adam Sinclair

MANY VIEWERS feel that Tony Hancock's new television series (ITV Wednesdays) is not as funny as his previous one. On the whole critics have not been kind to it. The much-loved 'Ancock of East Cheam, fed-up with life, aggressive, with fits of bloody-mindedness, seems to have been replaced by a rather nebulous, sometimes smart-alecky character of no real depth or meaning. Having rejected his old role, it seems, Hancock has not yet found a new one.

When I talked to Hancock last week, he had just come out of a rehearsal. He was thinner than I expected and looked as though he'd been doing a lot of hard work. He was not, as is often said, nervous.

I asked him why he had not continued in his old role.

'The setting began to get restricting,' said he. 'We were getting tangled up in it. That room in East Cheam, with the same old furniture, the same old clock on the mantelpiece—it was beginning to choke us. The thing was getting more difficult to write and to perform.'

'And I think it was going to get hackneyed. People want to see the same until it becomes *so much* the same that they don't want to see it. I never wanted them to say "It used to be good, now it's no good."'

Hancock's new series is the result of a serious reappraisal. 'I stopped work for a bit,' he said, 'and looked back over everything I'd done in the last ten years. I've tried to reject what I thought was bad and improve what I thought was good.'

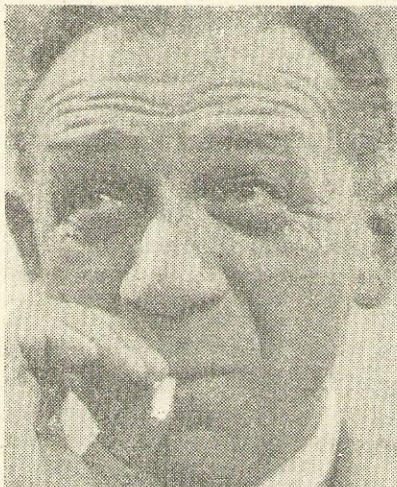
But he insists that he has not changed, that the old Hancock is not different from the new. 'Possibly I've developed slightly,' he told me, 'but basically I haven't changed. Certainly the background has changed—but the character hasn't.'

Hancock's old scriptwriters, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, now write for *Sieptoe and*

Son (which doesn't command so large an audience as Hancock). Hancock now has three lots of scriptwriters: Godfrey Harrison, who worked with him in his radio days; Richard Harris and Dennis Spooner, and Terry Nation. 'I think they're extremely good,' said Hancock, 'and they're very fast.'

Does he himself play a large part in writing the scripts?

'We all work very closely together,' he said. 'I often throw out ideas and make suggestions. A script is the result of a lot of personalities blending together. It's a slow, organic growth. And in comedy you don't



Sid James: 'Ancock's old mate.

Time and Tide asked Sid James, who is appearing in 'Puss in Boots' in Coventry, what he thought of Hancock's new series.

His comment: 'I haven't been able to see it—I'm always on stage when it comes on. It's breaking my heart.'

have to stick rigidly to the final version. You can make a lot of last-minute changes, and you can even ad-lib.

'No script will hold up without a good performance.'

I asked Hancock if he preferred working



Tony Hancock: as he was in the old series.

with Sid James, where two characters were directly juxtaposed, or whether he preferred the present arrangement of working with 'minor characters?'

'You don't really play against a character,' he said, 'but a situation. And you get this in either case.'

In fact in this new series, Hancock is to do one or two solos. I asked him if these required much more concentration?

'The first time I did it I had to,' he told me, 'because we'd chucked the script at the last minute. Since then, I've enjoyed it. I think it's rather easier, because the timing is all your own.'

Hancock has appeared in one serious television play, but he has no desire to play Hamlet. Comedy will always be his line. Among his favourite comedians are Chaplin, Jacques Tati and Laurel and Hardy. He thinks that on the whole European comedians are better than American ones. In the USA they tend to be too brash and slick, and their comedy does not depend on their personalities.

And he wants to continue making films.

'All my life I've wanted to be in films,' he said. 'The first one I was in was called *Orders is Orders*. It was a long time ago and I had a small walk-on part. It wasn't a success, but the trouble is that they keep reviving the thing.'

'I saw they'd put it on at the Astoria somewhere, so I decided to go and see it again. Ten minutes before it began, I went up to the woman in the kiosk and asked if I'd be able to get in if I went away for a quick drink.'

'Get in?' she said, looking at me strangely, 'you can have the whole circle if you want.'

'I came back and saw the film, and frankly I couldn't understand what it was about. It was confused and muddled. It made me so embarrassed that I had to go out before the end and hide in the cloakroom until everyone was gone.'

Hancock's latest film, *Punch and Judy* (made after his ten-year reappraisal), is to be released this spring.



The new Tony Hancock, with new colleagues Gerald Harper and Wilfred Lawson.