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“Is It Legal?”: A Forgotten Gem of British Television

by ROBERT M. JARVIS*

I INTRODUCTION

In March 2009, the *ABA Journal* asked 12 experts to pick the 25 best TV lawyer shows of all time. When the results were published several months later,¹ I was not at all surprised to find that my top choice—an English lawyer sitcom² called *Is It Legal?*—was nowhere

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¹ See Stephanie Francis Ward, *The 25 Greatest Legal TV Shows*, ABA J., Aug. 2009, at 34. The winners were as follows: 1) *L.A. Law*; 2) *Perry Mason*; 3) *The Defenders*; 4) *Law & Order*; 5) *The Practice*; 6) *Ally McBeal*; 7) *Rumpole of the Bailey*; 8) *Boston Legal*; 9) *Damages*; 10) *Night Court*; 11) *Judging Amy*; 12) *Owen Marshall, Counselor at Law*; 13) *JAG*; 14) *Shark*; 15) *Civil Wars*; 16) *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*; 17) *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*; 18) *Murder One*; 19) *Matlock*; 20) *Reasonable Doubts*; 21) *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*; 22) *Judd for the Defense*; 23) *Paper Chase*; 24) *Petrocelli*; 25) *Eli Stone*. *Id.* at 34-43.

² A situation comedy (or “sitcom”) is a 30-minute television program that features recurring characters who each week confront and solve one or more problems in a humorous manner. While the earliest sitcoms were set in the home, they now frequently occur in the workplace or among friends. As a result, the genre includes a variety of sub-genres (e.g., the “corncom,” or rural sitcom, such as *Green Acres* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and the “scificom,” or fantasy sitcom, such as *3rd Rock from the Sun* and *Mork & Mindy*). Sitcoms typically feature continuing storylines and running gags and often use guest stars to keep plots fresh (especially as a show ages). Because of the need to accommodate commercials, most sitcoms consist of 22-25 minutes of dialogue divided into discrete segments. Like other television serials, sitcoms are presented over the course of a season that can last as long as 26 weeks. For a further discussion, see BRETT MILLS, *TELEVISION SITCOM* (2005); PRIME TIME LAW: FICTIONAL TELEVISION AS LEGAL NARRATIVE 167-79 (Robert M. Jarvis & Paul R. Joseph eds. 1998) (tracing the evolution of lawyer sitcoms); WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Sitcom*, at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sitcom> (last visited July 1,

to be found. Undoubtedly, I was the only panelist who had voted for it.³ And in all probability, I was the only one who had ever heard of it.

My discovery of the show occurred by happenstance one New Year's Eve. Television, of course, tends to be dreadful during the holidays, and as I surfed the channels for something to watch I came across my local PBS station, which was airing an *Is It Legal?* marathon.⁴ In an instant, I was hooked.

Despite its superb writing and acting, the show's lack of fame is not hard to explain. First, it ran for only three seasons (1995-98), during which only 21 episodes were made.⁵ Second, it has only recently

2011) (explaining that the first television sitcom was *Pinwright's Progress*, which aired in England from 1946 to 1947).

Although a definitive historical list of sitcoms does not exist, Wikipedia has identified and cataloged nearly 1,000 such shows from some two dozen countries. See WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *List of Situation Comedies*, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_situation_comedies (last visited July 1, 2011).

³ A list of the panelists can be found in Ward, *supra* note 1, at 44. For the record, I voted as follows: 1) *Is It Legal?*; 2) *The Defenders*; 3) *Perry Mason*; 4) *L.A. Law*; 5) *Law & Order*; 6) *Rumpole of the Bailey*; 7) *Hill Street Blues*; 8) *Paper Chase*; 9) *The West Wing*; 10) *JAG*; 11) *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*; 12) *Night Court*; 13) *Matlock*; 14) *Ally McBeal*; 15) *100 Centre Street*; 16) *The Practice*; 17) *Judging Amy*; 18) *Boston Legal*; 19) *NYPD Blue*; 20) *Murder One*; 21) *The Bold Ones: The Lawyers*; 22) *Damages*; 23) *Owen Marshall, Counselor at Law*; 24) *Picket Fences*; 25) *I Married Joan*. E-mail from the author to Stephanie Francis Ward, Legal Affairs Writer—ABA Journal, Mar. 20, 2009, 3:54 p.m. (E.S.T.) (on file with the author).

⁴ As has been pointed out elsewhere, "In the United States, British sitcoms are rarely seen on the commercial networks, but are often seen on the Public Broadcasting Service and increasingly on cable television, including BBC America and Comedy Central." WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *British Situation Comedy*, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_situation_comedy (last visited July 1, 2011).

⁵ For a complete list of the show's episodes and air dates, see WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Is It Legal?*, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is_It_Legal%3F (last visited July 1, 2011) [hereinafter cited as IIL? Wikipedia Entry]. Similar guides can be found at THE INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE, "*Is It Legal?*," at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112019/> (last visited July 1, 2011) [hereinafter cited as IIL? IMDb Entry]; LOCATE TV, *Is It Legal?*, at <http://www.locatetv.com/tv/is-it-legal> (last visited July 1, 2011); TV.COM, *Is It Legal?*, at <http://www.tv.com/is-it-legal/show/7893/summary.html?tag=summary> (last visited July 1, 2011). Although it is missing five of the show's episodes (Episode 14 from the second season and Episodes 18-21 from the third season), a Kate Isitt fan site provides the most detailed descriptions of the episodes it does have (including quotes and pictures). See KATE ISITT.NET, *Guides*, at <http://www.flip18.co.uk/kateisitt/guides.htm> (last visited July 1, 2011).

been released on DVD⁶; previously, one had to make do with bootleg copies on web sites such as iOffer⁷ and YouTube.⁸ And third, British law shows tend not to get much play in the United States (*Rumpole of the Bailey* being a notable exception).⁹

For some time, I had been meaning to pen a tribute to *Is It Legal?*—the ABA's poll, however, caused that task to rise to the top of my "to do" list. Accordingly, Part II of this essay recounts how the show came to be written and produced, as well as its tortured relationship with the networks ITV and Channel 4. Part III then describes the six main characters, after which Part IV examines specific episodes.¹⁰

II

BROADCAST HISTORY

In 1989, Simon Nye, a 31-year old University of London-educated translator, published his first novel, a dark comedy about two slacker roommates entitled *Men Behaving Badly*.¹¹ After reading it, Beryl Vertue, the head of Hartswood Films Ltd., asked Nye to lunch and suggested he turn the book into a television series.¹²

⁶ See IIL? Wikipedia Entry, *supra* note 5 (explaining that Network DVD, a British distributor, released Season 1 on September 13, 2010; Season 2 on January 17, 2011; and Season 3 on March 21, 2011).

⁷ See, e.g., *Is It Legal? Imelda Staunton DVD*, at <http://www.ioffer.com/i/Is-It-Legal-%3F-Imelda-Staunton-DVD-117664579> (last visited July 1, 2011) (complete set offered for \$13.00 by "Meluvharibo").

⁸ See, e.g., *Is It Legal?*, at http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=is+it+legal%3F&aq=f (last visited July 1, 2011) (all 21 episodes posted by "FreddieMercury 1234").

⁹ As a result, most Americans are unfamiliar with such top notch programs as *Blind Justice*, *Judge John Deed*, and *Kavanagh, QC*. For a discussion of these works, see, e.g., LAWYERS IN YOUR LIVING ROOM! LAW ON TELEVISION 175-215 (Michael Asimow ed. 2009). See also Sergio Angelini, *Legal Drama: Television Dons Its Wig and Gown*, at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1201669/index.html> (last visited July 1, 2011).

¹⁰ Because the show's scripts are unavailable, the dialogue in these two sections has been transcribed from the show's episodes. Accordingly, minor differences (particularly with respect to the spelling of proper names) may exist between the original screenplays and what appears herein.

¹¹ D.J. Taylor, *Bad Jokes at Breakfast Time*, THE INDEPENDENT (London), July 29, 1989, at 30 (Weekend Books).

¹² *Personal File: Simon Nye*, THE EVENING STANDARD (London), Oct. 9, 2000, at 5. Vertue, who pioneered the concept of selling domestic television formats to

Men Behaving Badly began airing in 1992 and, after a slow start, became “the seminal mainstream [British] sitcom of the 1990s.”¹³ Thus, when Nye got the idea for a new sitcom about solicitors, he naturally enlisted both Vertue and Martin Dennis, the director of *Men Behaving Badly*.¹⁴ Nye later called writing *Is It Legal?* the best job he ever had.¹⁵

foreign markets, is now considered one of the key figures in the development of British television. See WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Beryl Vertue*, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beryl_Vertue (last visited July 1, 2011) (explaining that in the 1970s Vertue repackaged the English sitcoms *Steptoe and Son* and *Til Death Do Us Part*, which in America became, respectively, *Sanford and Son* and *All in the Family*). For a further look at Vertue’s place in programming history, see A.S. BERMAN, 30 YEARS OF BRITISH TELEVISION 144-53 (2008).

¹³ JULIAN HALL, *THE ROUGH GUIDE TO BRITISH CULT COMEDY* 126 (2006). Crude and offensive, the show was a central player in the “lad culture” movement, which celebrated (and in turn encouraged) loutish male behavior (i.e., drinking, fighting, and sex) “by rebuffing all that nonsense about ‘new [i.e., sensitive] men.’” *Id.* See also THE BRITISH COMEDY GUIDE, *Men Behaving Badly*, at http://www.sitcom.co.uk/men_badly/ (last visited July 1, 2011) (“‘Men Behaving Badly’ is certainly a funny sitcom but be warned it is so in a rude, ‘laddish’ way. The BBC received many complaints from viewers about the crude jokes. . . .”). For a further discussion, see, e.g., JOHN BEYNON, *MASCULINITIES AND CULTURE* (2002) (noting, *id.* at 111, that in the 1990s, “Lads’ programmes dominated [British] television ratings, most notably *Men Behaving Badly*, with its two male lead roles [Tony Smart and Gary Strang] played by Neil Morrissey and Martin Clunes.”). See also LESLIE ASH & MEGAN LLOYD DAVIES, *MY LIFE BEHAVING BADLY* 76 (2007) (“*Men Behaving Badly* . . . was different and daring—it was all about drinking lager, shagging women and being a bit crude.”).

In 1996, an American version of *Men Behaving Badly* (starring Justine Bateman) began airing on NBC but was cancelled midway through its second season. See WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Men Behaving Badly (U.S. TV Series)*, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men_Behaving_Badly_\(U.S._TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men_Behaving_Badly_(U.S._TV_series)) (last visited July 1, 2011). Nye blamed the show’s failure on the network’s use of multiple writers (which he felt resulted in over-edited scripts), the need to produce a large number of episodes in a short period of time (because American television seasons are much longer than English television seasons), and the rejection of certain controversial story ideas (due to the greater censorship that exists in the United States). See Simon Nye, *Where My Pitches Had to Pop*, THE INDEPENDENT (London), Mar. 30, 1997, at 22 (Features). For a further discussion of the behind-the-camera differences between American and British sitcoms, see, e.g., MILLS, *supra* note 2, at 54-58, and BERMAN, *supra* note 12, at 149-50.

¹⁴ See Hartswood Films Ltd., *Is It Legal[?]*, at http://www.hartswoodfilms.co.uk/programmes/com_legal.html (last visited July 1, 2011) (listing Vertue as the show’s producer, Nye as its writer, and Dennis as its director).

¹⁵ *Personal File*, *supra* note 12.

Although most observers consider *Men Behaving Badly* to be the better show, the respected television critic Charles Jennings has argued that the reverse is true:

Like other lawyer shows, most of the action occurred indoors, with filming taking place at the famed Teddington Studios in south-west London.¹⁶ When the storyline shifted outdoors, shooting moved to the towns of Staines and Walton-on-Thames in the south-east county of Surrey.¹⁷

In contrast to many sitcoms, *Is It Legal?* did not have a jokey opening theme song. Instead, over instrumental music arranged by the noted composer Debbie Wiseman,¹⁸ the partial image of a child's wind-up toy filled the screen. After a few seconds, the camera pulled back to reveal more such toys, which were now recognizable as the "three wise monkeys."¹⁹ As the names of the show's co-stars ran along the bottom, the monkeys could be seen scurrying late at night through a law firm, which was strewn with treatises, client files, memoranda, a dictation tape, photographs, a solicitor's brief to counsel,²⁰ and discarded drafts balled-up into little pieces of paper.

Will Simon Nye's *Is it Legal?* (Channel 4, 9.30pm) ever get to be cult, in the way *Men Behaving Badly* did and *Brothers and Sisters* [a comedy-drama set in a gospel church community] could? Like *Brothers and Sisters*, this too is loping, disarticulatedly surreal; but whereas *B&S* seethes with business, *Is It Legal?* is all about ennui, neurosis, static obsession. Of course, *Men Behaving Badly* had plenty of that, but it also had the charismatic Martin Clunes and a whole social trend [i.e., Laddism] to tap into.

Is It Legal? recirculates endlessly between people unable to drag themselves out of the prisons of their own fixations, with Kate Isitt doing the blonde siren/Leslie Ash bit and Patrick Barlow simply brilliant as an anguished repressive called Bob.

I thought it was great, better by a mile than *MBB*, a fix for millennial entropy fans everywhere.

Charles Jennings, *Television: Wednesday 28 October*, THE OBSERVER (London), Oct. 25, 1998, at 81.

¹⁶ IIL? WIKIPEDIA ENTRY, *supra* note 5.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ IIL? IMDB ENTRY, *supra* note 5. Curiously, Wiseman does not list *Is It Legal?* on her otherwise comprehensive web site. See Debbie Wiseman, *Film and Television Credits*, at <http://www.debbiewiseman.co.uk/credits/film-tv.asp> (last visited July 1, 2011).

¹⁹ Nye's use of the three wise monkeys ("See No Evil," "Hear No Evil," and "Speak No Evil") was a small but telling gesture, for each week, like their proverbial counterparts, the show's characters struggled with a new set of improprieties. For a discussion of the origin of the three wise monkeys, see, e.g., *Herman v. Mercantile Bank, N.A.*, 143 F.3d 419, 422-23 (8th Cir. 1998) (Bright, Cir. J., dissenting).

²⁰ As per tradition, the brief was neatly tied in a pink ribbon. See WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Pink Ribbon*, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pink_ribbon (last visited July 1, 2011).

By the end of the sequence, the trio had come to rest on a heavy brown book lying on its side with the words "Is It Legal?" stamped in gold on its spine. Underneath the book was Nye's name.²¹ At the conclusion of each episode the shadows of the monkeys could be seen falling on a set of law books while the opening music was repeated and the evening's credits scrolled down.

Each episode of *Is It Legal?* was divided into two parts so that commercials could be aired halfway through the show. While this was a standard feature of ITV programs, critics accustomed to watching *Men Behaving Badly* on the commercial-free BBC complained that the break tended to "hamper the proceedings."²²

Is It Legal? made its debut at 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday, September 12, 1995.²³ The next day, high praise was heard from all quarters.²⁴ In November 1995, just after the show finished its first season, ITV ordered a new batch of episodes.²⁵ In December 1995, the series was honored with a British Comedy Award.²⁶

²¹ Such star billing for a television writer was unprecedented and reflected the success Nye had achieved with *Men Behaving Badly*. See James Rampton, *Nye's Work*, THE INDEPENDENT (London), Sept. 8, 1995, at 29 (Metro).

²² Jaci Stephen, *There's No Law Against A Good Laugh*, DAILY MIRROR (London), Sept. 13, 1995, at 1 (Features).

For readers unfamiliar with the British television industry, a word of explanation may be helpful. In 1927, the BBC was set up by the government. In 1932, it began regular television broadcasts and in 1964 split into two channels: BBC-1 (a general network) and BBC-2 (a niche programmer). See ASA BRIGGS, THE HISTORY OF BROADCASTING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (1995). In 1955, ITV (also known as Channel 3) was formed to provide a commercial alternative to the BBC. See SIMON CHERRY, ITV: THE PEOPLE'S CHANNEL (2005). In 1982, Channel 4 was established as a second commercial outlet. See DOROTHY HOBSON, CHANNEL 4: THE EARLY YEARS AND THE JEREMY ISAACS LEGACY (2008).

²³ Joe Steeples, *Cops Put My Backup*, SUNDAY MIRROR (London), Sept. 10, 1995, at 32 (Features) (describing the show in a preview as "one to watch").

²⁴ See, e.g., Peter Paterson, *Divine Imelda Lays Down the Law*, DAILY MAIL (London), Sept. 13, 1995, at 43; Stephen, *supra* note 22; Lynne Truss, *Seasickness Alleviated at the Solicitors' Office*, TIMES (U.K.), Sept. 13, 1995, at 47. See also Joe Steeples, *Legally Blinding*, SUNDAY MIRROR (London), Sept. 17, 1995, at 36 (Features).

²⁵ Geoffrey Phillips, *Behind the Screen*, THE EVENING STANDARD (London), Nov. 3, 1995, at 43.

²⁶ Jackie Burdon, *Old Stagers Scoop Comedy Awards*, PRESS ASSOCIATION NEWS (London), Dec. 3, 1995, available at LEXIS, News & Bus. File. Among the categories at the British Comedy Awards is one for "Best International Comedy TV Show," and American recipients have included *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Seinfeld*, and *The Simpsons*. See THE BRITISH COMEDY AWARDS, *Past Winners*, at <http://www.britishcomedyawards.com/index.html> (last visited July 1, 2011).

The second season began production in August 1996 and premiered in October 1996.²⁷ By the time it wrapped up in December 1996, a third installment seemed a certainty,²⁸ especially after the series was again nominated for a British Comedy Award.²⁹ But in a surprising move, ITV dropped *Is It Legal?*³⁰

In February 1998, following months of lobbying by Vertue,³¹ Channel 4 agreed to pick up the show.³² As a result, the third season premiered on Wednesday, October 28, 1998, at 9:30 p.m.³³ In the interim, however, co-star Jeremy Clyde had become unavailable,³⁴ which required his character to be written out of the show. Coupled with a greater focus on the remaining characters' sex lives,³⁵ as well as

²⁷ Murray Buesst, *New Summons for Solicitors*, M2 Presswire, June 12, 1996, available at LEXIS, News & Bus. File. For its second season, the show moved from Tuesdays to Thursdays but remained at 8:30 p.m. Aidan Smith, *What's on TV Next Week*, SCOTTISH DAILY RECORD, Oct. 19, 1996, at 22.

²⁸ A March 1997 press release issued by Carlton Television (one of ITV's franchisees), for example, prematurely advised, "Simon Nye's award-winning IS IT LEGAL? returns for a third run." Murray Buesst, *Howman Meets Behr in the Wood*, M2 PRESSWIRE, Mar. 18, 1997, available at LEXIS, News & Bus. File.

²⁹ Murray Buesst, *Carlton Gathers Bouquet of Montreux Roses*, M2 PRESSWIRE, Mar. 19, 1997, available at LEXIS, News & Bus. File.

³⁰ Although the network claimed that the show's ratings were not high enough to warrant renewal, see THE BRITISH COMEDY GUIDE, *Is It Legal?*, at http://www.sitcom.co.uk/sitcoms/is_it_legal.shtml (last visited July 1, 2011), critics insisted the decision was proof of ITV's unwillingness to support innovative programming. See Marcus Berkmann, *A Comedy Revolution Has Hit Our Screens, But ITV Programme Chiefs Are Just Men Behaving Drably*, MAIL ON SUNDAY (London), Jan. 4, 1998, at 48.

³¹ See Nancy Banks-Smith, *Last Night's TV: Other Women Just Burn Their Bras . . .*, THE GUARDIAN (LONDON), Dec. 10, 1998, at 19.

³² Maggie Brown, *Media Diary*, TIMES (U.K.), Feb. 13, 1998, at 39.

³³ James Rampton, *On Air: Mister Men Behaving Badly*, THE INDEPENDENT (London), Oct. 26, 1998 at 18 (Features).

³⁴ Whether Clyde was actually unavailable or simply did not want to continue doing the show remains a matter of some dispute. See IIL? WIKIPEDIA ENTRY, *supra* note 5.

³⁵ As a result, the third season became fixated on such topics as g-strings, masturbation on the job, and whether large breasts were scary. See *Is It Legal?*, Episode 15 ("A Question of Pants") (Channel 4, first broadcast Oct. 28, 1998); *Is It Legal?*, Episode 16 ("Polishing the Mouse") (Channel 4, first broadcast Nov. 4, 1998); *Is It Legal?*, Episode 18 ("Glad to Be Colin") (Channel 4, first broadcast Nov. 18, 1998).

Nye's decision to shift from law-driven plotlines to increasingly outrageous personal ones is reminiscent of the "jump the shark" changes that have taken place near the end of other lawyer shows. See, e.g., Martha P. Nochimson, *Ally McBeal: Brightness Falls From the Air*, 53 FILM Q. 25, 25 (Spr. 2000) ("Beginning as a brilliant,

poorer production values, the show's quality suffered markedly.³⁶ As a result, Channel 4 did not bring the series back for a fourth season.³⁷

Today, ITV regularly re-broadcasts the first two seasons but has been unable to reach an agreement with Channel 4 regarding the third season.³⁸ For its part, Channel 4 has never taken the show out of mothballs.³⁹

III CHARACTERS

Is It Legal? was set in the scruffy western London suburb of Hounslow,⁴⁰ where a group of solicitors known as Lotus, Spackman &

complicated representation [of a lawyer's struggle to achieve a healthy work-life balance] . . . 'Ally McBeal' has become an embarrassment to itself and its creative team."). For a further discussion, see JON HEIN, *JUMP THE SHARK: WHEN GOOD THINGS GO BAD* (2003), and www.BoneTheFish.com.

³⁶ Peter Paterson, *A Witty Skit on a Writ*, DAILY MAIL (London), Oct. 29, 1998, at 53. See also BRITISH COMEDY GUIDE, *supra* note 30 ("The highly-entertaining first two [seasons were] overshadowed by the third, which although entertaining, lacked the same quality of its predecessors.").

One highly visible change was the lead-in that began each episode. Over banjo music composed by Mark Russell, cartoonish versions of the characters were now seen fumbling around the office (which had been repainted bright pink) followed by a red file folder whose pages sequentially credited Nye, Vertue, and Dennis. The same music was replayed at the end of each episode, when the evening's credits (in gold) scrolled across the back of the folder.

³⁷ *Is It Legal? Fails to Win Second Series From Channel 4 After Poor Ratings*, BROADCAST, Jan. 8, 1999, available at LEXIS, News & Bus. File. Although some observers thought Vertue might be able to find a third home for the show, see Banks-Smith, *supra* note 31, this hope did not pan out.

In June 2000, the BBC sought to fill the hole left by *Is It Legal?* with its own lawyer sitcom called *Chambers*. Previously a radio program, the show was written by real-life barrister Clive Coleman and lasted two seasons. See WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Chambers*, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chambers_\(series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chambers_(series)) (last visited July 1, 2011). See also Rachel Halliburton, *Law: Laugh? I Nearly Lost My Briefs*, THE INDEPENDENT (London), June 13, 2000, at 11 (Features) (briefly comparing the two shows).

³⁸ *Is It Legal?* WIKIPEDIA ENTRY, *supra* note 5.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Founded in the early 13th century, Hounslow was originally a resting spot catering to weary travelers but later became a manufacturing center. See SUE McALPINE, *VOICES OF EALING AND HOUNSLOW* (2000). Today, owing to its close proximity to London (approximately 10 miles) and the fact that it sits just to the east of Heathrow Airport, Hounslow is attempting to reinvent itself as a place where companies and families can find convenient, reasonably-priced space. See ANDREA CAMERON, *HOUNSLOW TOWN: PAST AND PRESENT* (2005). This effort has met with only limited success, however, and the town remains depressed. Hounslow is perhaps

Phelps ("LSP") maintained a ramshackle general practice above a sandwich shop called Mr. Bappy (whose slogan was "We Bake It Better").⁴¹ As the series opened, LSP's senior partner had retired⁴² and transferred his position to his likeable but dimwitted son Colin.⁴³

Colin's entry into the firm was met with mixed reactions. As usual, Dick Spackman, LSP's dapper rainmaker whose main interests were golf, sailing, and sherry, was largely oblivious to the change.⁴⁴ In contrast, Stella Phelps, whose sharp mind was matched only by

best known as the birthplace of musicians Phil Collins and Jimmy Page. For a further description, see WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Hounslow*, at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hounslow> (last visited July 1, 2011).

⁴¹ In England, a "bap" is a large, soft roll that is usually filled with either meat or cheese. For pictures and a recipe, see Don Hogeland, *British Brown Baps*, at <http://www.woodfiredkitchen.com/?p=693> (last visited July 1, 2011). The word "bap" is also slang for breast, see JONATHAN BERNSTEIN, *KNICKERS IN A TWIST: A DICTIONARY OF BRITISH SLANG 11* (2006), and Nye used this alternate meaning in several episodes.

⁴² It is not clear what caused Mr. Lotus (the show did not reveal his first name) to retire:

Bob: We all miss your father. Is he enjoying his retirement?

Colin: Oh yes. Gardening, cooking, walking.

Bob: Marvelous.

Colin: Yes, he's given all that up. Just sits in an armchair all day watching the telly.

Is It Legal?, Episode 1 ("Death in Hounslow") (ITV, first broadcast Sept. 12, 1995).

⁴³ In handing down his partnership, Mr. Lotus instructed the firm to make sure that Colin earned his keep:

Stella: Now when you father passed on his partnership in the firm to you—oh happy day—he made two stipulations as you know.

Colin: Yes.

Stella: That you no longer mention your imaginary friend Peter and that you start at the bottom of the professional ladder.

Colin: Yes, he didn't want me to have an unfair advantage.

Stella: Well I think we'll all agree you don't have any advantages.

Is It Legal?, Episode 8 ("Solicitors in Love") (ITV, first broadcast Oct. 24, 1996).

⁴⁴ Even when he remembered that Colin was working at the firm, Dick remained his usual unaware self:

Dick: Morning everyone. Anything spooky or alarming to report?

Bob and Alison: No, no [despite having just accidentally shredded an entire case file].

Dick: Our new chap Colin's proving a bit of a hit?

Bob and Alison: Not entirely.

Dick [only half-listening]: Sensational.

"Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

her sharp tongue, immediately recognized that Colin would be one more nuisance she would have to sort out while she struggled to keep the practice afloat,⁴⁵ an endeavor in which she got no help from anyone: "All I've got to do today is run a solicitors' [office] with a staff that shows as much interest in the law as Saddam Hussein shows in the Hounslow donkey sanctuary."⁴⁶

In *It Legal?* (Biblic: Tapes, 1990-1992)
Shown from left, Richard Lammiman, British Columbia, Jeremy Clyde
Credit: PhotoQuest/PhotoQuest

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The lawyers of *Is It Legal?* (L-R): Colin Lotus, Stella Phelps, and Dick Spackman.

With Dick observing banker's hours, Stella took the lead in introducing Colin to the staff: Bob Birch, the repressed office manager;

⁴⁵ Nye, a master at conveying ideas without using words, accomplished this by showing Stella standing at her office window, where she watched as Colin, on his first day of work, tried to exit a taxicab from the wrong side (thereby causing a traffic accident). Knowing precisely when he would arrive, and being on hand to welcome him, told the audience that Stella was well-mannered, punctual, attentive to details, and serious-minded.

⁴⁶ "Solicitors in Love," *supra* note 43.

Alison, the lazy secretary; and Darren, the uppity errand boy. Consumed by their own concerns, they displayed little interest in their new boss.

A. *Colin Lotus*

Despite its ensemble nature, *Is It Legal?* revolved around the gangly, mop-haired Colin (played by Richard Lumsden),⁴⁷ and much of the show was seen from his point of view. Although well-meaning and eager to please, Colin lacked common sense, a fact made clear when Stella welcomed him on his first day:

Stella: Dick's out.

Colin [looking confused while dutifully unzipping his pants]: What's this—some kind of initiation ceremony like at school?

Stella: Dick's out of the office. I mean, you know him, of course.

Colin: Oh, oh, Dick. Yes, yes, Dick. You don't forget Dick in a hurry. Good old Dick. Dicky. Who's Dick?

Stella: Dick Spackman.

Colin [excitedly]: Oh, Mr. Spackman. With you, with you.⁴⁸

Further evidence of Colin's questionable intelligence came soon afterwards, when Stella reminded him that "in the first of nine tries at the law exam you registered a score so small you were sent to a secret government establishment for tests."⁴⁹

Notwithstanding his many mistakes (which he cheerfully dismissed with the phrase, "That is so easy to do!"), Colin believed he was destined for a career in law and was determined to make his father proud.⁵⁰ Still, Colin did not want to simply follow in his footsteps, for he hoped to make a difference in the world. When asked his specialty, he responded, "Caring. And I'll tell you why. It's because frankly, if you don't want to help people, you're better off

⁴⁷ When a potential client kept insulting his hair, an upset Colin asked Stella, "What's wrong with my hair?" She assured him, "Nothing, it's lovely. Though it's very much a shock of hair, isn't it?" *Is It Legal?*, Episode 11 ("Darren's Revenge") (ITV, first broadcast Nov. 14, 1996).

⁴⁸ "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

⁴⁹ *Is it Legal?*, Episode 2 ("Whodunnit?") (ITV, first broadcast Sept. 19, 1995).

⁵⁰ As Colin explained in the first episode, "The legal profession is in my blood, you see. Actually, that's just on my father's side. My mother has scaffolding in her blood." "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

being a speck.”⁵¹ In line with this explanation, Colin regularly clamored for a chance to do criminal defense work on behalf of the indigent:

Colin: I entered the law so that I could help those less fortunate than myself.

Dick [surprised]: Did you? What an intriguing idea.

Colin: I want to handle more criminal cases.

Dick: Oh, I don't think we want criminals in the office, do we? Awash with flick knives and copies of the *Daily Mirror*, rolling up their horrid little cigarettes.

Colin: But I'm stagnating.

Dick: Hmm, me too. Ah, you'll come to enjoy it.⁵²

Because of Colin's error-prone nature, the firm limited him to probate work⁵³ and gave him menial assignments to keep him busy.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Is It Legal?*, Episode 4 (“Colin Heals the World”) (ITV, first broadcast Oct. 3, 1995).

A “flick knife” is a British term for a switchblade. See WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Switchblade*, at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Switchblade> (last visited July 1, 2011). The *Daily Mirror*, founded in 1903, is a sensationalist tabloid newspaper aimed at working-class readers. See WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, *Daily Mirror*, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daily_Mirror#The_Mirror_today (last visited July 1, 2011).

⁵³ When Colin complained about this fact, Stella told him, “Well, we just feel you're safer with dead people.” “Solicitors in Love,” *supra* note 43.

Historically, of course, trusts and estates was considered one of the less demanding parts of the profession. Yet even the simplest aspects of the subject proved daunting for Colin. In one episode, Stella reminded him, “You misunderstood the word ‘intestate’ and accidentally advised a grieving widow that her husband had died having no testicles,” *Is It Legal?*, Episode 3 (“Dick's House of Horror”) (ITV, first broadcast Sept. 26, 1995), while in another she responded to Colin's insistence that wills are “unexciting” by saying, “Well, I seem to remember some excitement when you told a sobbing Angela Wig that she had been left 10,000 pants rather than pounds.” *Is It Legal?*, Episode 13 (“Office Party”) (ITV, first broadcast Nov. 28, 1996). On still another occasion, she was forced to review the basics of client counseling with him:

Colin: So how can I become a better solicitor?

Stella: Well, as our wills and probate specialist you meet a lot of grieving, vulnerable people, don't you?

Colin: Yes I do and they're all so bloody gloomy.

Stella: So tact is probably an area where you can tighten up.

Colin: Tact. Really?

Stella: Yeah. Now listen, you were going to try to stop saying, “Ok, who died?,” weren't you? So, you know, how, how is that going?

Colin: Ah, I still think it's important to break the ice.

Thus, in addition to fetching snacks for the office,⁵⁵ coordinating vacation schedules,⁵⁶ and serving as the firm's "staff counselor,"⁵⁷ Stella put him in charge of updating LSP's marketing brochure. The results were predictably bad:

Stella: So, uh, how's the new brochure coming along?

Colin: Oh, uh, it's good. I've roughed out a few ideas. Smig Bonnet Wincey have gone for the five-people-in-suits-looking-serious approach. I thought we should do a slightly less stuffy version. [Holds up a mock-up of his idea.]

Stella: Yes, yes, on the other hand it's important not to make people burst into tears and literally run off to other solicitors, isn't it?

Colin: Yes, I suppose it's a balance, isn't it?

Stella: It is, yes. And, and when reading out a will you no longer say, "Ooh, spooky," do you?

Colin: No I don't.

Stella: Well done.

Is It Legal?, Episode 21 ("1979") (Channel 4, first broadcast Dec. 9, 1998).

⁵⁴ As a result, by the end of the series Colin had made almost no progress at becoming a competent solicitor:

Colin: Well, I shall be away from my desk all day. I've still got lots to learn and who better to learn from than the undisputed queen among solicitors?

Bob: Dave Bickerstaff at SBW?

Stella [frantic]: No, me, me!

Id.

⁵⁵ Colin spent a great deal of time picking out the snacks and serving them with tea, which he dispensed in mugs emblazoned with such silly sayings as "Jesus is Coming, Look Busy." "1979," *supra* note 53. The ritual became so much a part of the office's routine that when he later neglected to include Stella, she demanded to know why she had been left off the "bun distribution list":

Stella: There wasn't a bun for me just now, was there? Why?

Colin: We don't see you as a bun sort of person.

Stella: What do you see me as?

Colin [groping for the right words]: As, as a non-bun sort of person.

Is It Legal?, Episode 10 ("Alison Gets Laid") (ITV, first broadcast Nov. 7, 1996).

⁵⁶ When everyone insisted on taking their summer holiday in August, Colin had to give up his own elaborate travel plans to ensure that someone was available to cover the office. As usual, he cheerfully accepted his lot by observing, "When you're in the legal profession you're already on the trip of a lifetime." *Is It Legal?*, Episode 9 ("Hounslow F.M.") (ITV, first broadcast Oct. 31, 1996).

⁵⁷ Colin took this position very seriously and was always on the lookout for ways to make LSP a happier place. After reading that Japanese law firms value togetherness and place a great deal of emphasis on achieving "Wa" (harmony), Colin invited everyone to his home for dinner. Unfortunately, the evening was marred when he later discovered that someone had taken £100 from a jar on his mantle. *Is It Legal?*, Episode 20 ("Someone Is Lying") (Channel 4, first broadcast Dec. 2, 1998).

Stella: So, the same, but with our heads on farmyard animals?

Colin: Yes.

Stella: Do you think that sends the right message to potential clients looking for reliable legal help?

Colin [quite pleased with what he has come up with]: Yes I do.⁵⁸

B. Dick Spackman

A cross between Noël Coward and David Niven, Dick (Jeremy Clyde) was a natural bon vivant who disliked both hard work and the law.⁵⁹ He was, however, an expert on the good things in life, made friends easily, and possessed a thick rolodex, which he used to attract business to the firm:

Dick: Now Colin let me introduce a smidge of reality into your life. There are three partners in this firm: you, me, and Stella. I bring in the work, you watch the work arrive, have a stab at it, and then wait for somebody, usually Bob, to come in and undo what you've done and put it back in the in-tray. That leaves one person who actually does all the work. Now who is that person Colin?

Colin: Stella.

Dick [finishing the lesson]: Stella.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Is It Legal?*, Episode 17 ("Big Desk Bob") (Channel 4, first broadcast Nov. 11, 1998).

⁵⁹ As Dick saw things, he was "a top drawer solicitor [whose] forte isn't the law." "Hounslow F.M.," *supra* note 56. Thus, when Colin asked to borrow one of his law books, Dick (seen sitting at his desk reading the latest issue of *Collectors Guide*) replied, "Help yourself. I have to say, page for page you're better off with an antiques mag." "Alison Gets Laid," *supra* note 55.

⁶⁰ *Is It Legal?*, Episode 7 ("Resignation") (ITV, first broadcast Oct. 24, 1995).

Jeremy Clyde's decision to leave the show after two seasons, see *supra* note 34, forced Nye to turn Stella into the firm's rainmaker. This drastic overhaul did not play well, in large part because it did not mesh with what viewers had to come to know about her. Indeed, during the second season Nye had built an entire episode around a planned golf outing involving Dick and a potential client. But while moving a computer monitor, Dick threw out his back, forcing Stella to stand in for him despite protesting, "You know I hate all that lunching stuff. . . . You know the set up . . . I do all the work and you do all the smarming." "Darren's Revenge," *supra* note 47.

Viewers were informed of Dick's departure in the first episode of the third season, when Stella convened a staff meeting:

Stella: But just because I'm the only remaining senior partner here now doesn't mean I've become the big ogre.

Colin [speaking in sing-song]: Big ogre. Not the big ogre.

Stella: Now I want you to remember that I'm a human being first and a solicitor second.

That Dick was hopeless at the fundamentals of being a lawyer became very obvious when he was forced to cover a court hearing⁶¹ because Stella was double-booked:

Stella: Dick, how did it go in court?

Dick: Hmm, pretty well as far as I can tell. Of course you never quite know where you are with fickle old Lady Justice. She's a tricky little miss.

Stella: Yes. It didn't actually go well, did it?

Dick: Yes it did.

Stella: Oh, well that's interesting, because the clerk of the court has faxed me a list of mistakes you made that she thinks you might not want to make in the future.

Dick: Really?

Stella: Yes. Number one. When arriving at court don't toss your car keys to a policeman and say, "Park that for me, would you please?" Do not address the chief magistrate as, "My dear girl," or the heavily-besppectacled court stenographer as "old pebbles there."

Dick [protesting]: Oh I think he quite liked it.

Stella [continuing on]: Refrain from asking the usher for a sherry during the summing up. And when you do make a mistake try not to blame the Home Secretary or call him that "shifty little toad." Have you got that?⁶²

Colin [still speaking in sing-song]: First human, then solicitor.

Stella: Colin, you're doing the mantra again.

Bob: I dropped in to see Dick yesterday. He said taking early retirement is the best thing he's ever done.

Stella: Oh, is he looking well?

Bob: I don't know. He shouted that though the letterbox.

Stella: Now obviously we all loved Dick.

[Murmurs of half-hearted agreement are heard from Colin, Bob, Alison, and Darren.]

Stella: But he was smug, vague about the law, slightly musty, unsure of our names, and often drunk.

"A Question of Pants," *supra* note 35.

⁶¹ At one time, solicitors could only appear in the inferior courts (i.e., County Court and Magistrates' Court), but in 1992 they became eligible to apply for audience rights in the superior courts (i.e., High Court, Court of Appeals, and Supreme Court). By the time *Is It Legal?* finished its run, 1,000 of the country's 68,000 solicitors had obtained such additional licensing. See Andy Boon & John Flood, *Trials of Strength: The Reconfiguration of Litigation as a Contested Terrain*, 33 *LAW & Soc'y* 595, 598 (1999).

⁶² *Is It Legal?*, Episode 12 ("Dick in Court") (ITV, first broadcast Nov. 21, 1996).

As has been explained elsewhere, in the English lower courts an usher is "responsible for maintaining silence and order . . . , swearing in jurors and witnesses, and otherwise aiding the judge." *BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY* 1683 (9th ed. 2009). Thus, roughly speaking, in such courts an usher is the English equivalent of an American bailiff.

In discussing his daily routine, Stella explained: "Dick tends to arrive late, leave early, and in between act like a dignitary visiting from another solar system."⁶³ Dick's casual attitude grated on Stella to no end:

Dick: Pet custody case. I can't handle it. I'm already overstretched.

Stella: Dick, you are the least overstretched solicitor in history. You wouldn't know overstretched if it vomited on you during one of your endless smug luncheons or your endless rounds of golf. Believe me Dick, you are here and overstretched is [pulling her hands wide apart] here.

Dick: But, ah, you see, the stretching, the stretching. You do yours here, in your frilly office, with all its books on . . . what have you.

Stella: The law?

Dick: The law. Yes. I do mine in restaurants and golf clubs, getting people drunk enough to bring us their business. Actually, it's rather demeaning.

Stella: Well, I'll do it then.

Dick: No, no. There's no need for both of us to be demeaned.⁶⁴

Having had her say, Stella relented and agreed to handle the case, which involved an unlikeable couple fighting over custody of their dog, a Dalmatian named Malcolm.⁶⁵

C. *Stella Phelps*

Although the junior name partner, Stella Phelps (Imelda Staunton) was the firm's stern taskmaster, a position that made good use of her temperament⁶⁶ even as it ate away at her soul: "I used to be so

⁶³ "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ To decide who should get Malcolm, Stella took the couple to an open field and placed Malcolm between them. She then instructed the couple to call out his name. Rather than running to either of them, Malcolm hilariously took off in a third direction. Eventually, Colin was allowed to adopt Malcolm and renamed him Tucker. In a later episode, Colin brought Tucker to the firm on "National Bring Your Pet Into Work Day" (much to Stella's dismay), where he caused havoc. "Dick in Court," *supra* note 62.

⁶⁶ In an interview, Staunton explained she felt an immediate kinship with Stella:

On the outside she is small and jolly with curly hair and a ready giggle. But inside Imelda Staunton there's a dragon waiting to get out.

Viewers will get a glimpse of her crustier character in the new ITV sitcom *Is It Legal?* by award-winning writer Simon Nye—the genius behind [the] hit comedy *Men Behaving Badly*.

Imelda plays Stella, a snarling solicitor who stalks the corridors of a chaotic law firm. The actress says it's a great relief to be able to reveal the less-than-sugary side of her nature.

anti-authority. I became a lawyer partly to stop people being shat on and now I have to play Miss Whiplash every day to keep this firm going so I am a figure of hate."⁶⁷

Despite her steely exterior, Stella was a sad figure⁶⁸ who lamented her three unsuccessful marriages, her lack of a love life, and her failure to achieve professional prominence:

Stella: When I was about 10 they went around the class and asked us what we wanted to be: ballet dancers, pop singers, princesses of small European principalities. Linda Jacobs wanted to work on an oil rig for some reason. I said I want to be the best solicitor in the country. You know what happened?

"I'm probably more like Stella than anyone else I've ever played. Stella is permanently poised to jump down anyone's throat," she says.

Imelda was desperate to get away from the sort of jolly parts she has played in sitcoms such as *Up The Garden Path*, with Neil McCaul.

"I don't want to play those bubbly characters anymore because there is a side to me which is quite hard," Imelda says.

Sue Malins, *I Love to Behave Badly; Imelda Shows Legal Claws*, DAILY MIRROR (London), Sept. 9, 1995, at 8 (Features). In at least one respect, however, Staunton was nothing like Stella. As she told a reporter, she was terrible at office work and quit the only conventional job she had after being unable to master the switchboard. See Angela Hagan, *Imelda's Panic Call*, DAILY MIRROR (London), Oct. 19, 1996, at 5 (Features). For a further look at Staunton's career, see PERFORMING WOMEN: STAND-UPS, STRUMPETS AND ITINERANTS 118-29 (Alison Oddey ed. 1999).

⁶⁷ "Alison Gets Laid," *supra* note 55.

⁶⁸ Portraying Stella as both strong and sad posed a significant challenge for Staunton:

Stella Phelps, the character Imelda Staunton plays in ITV's sitcom, *Is It Legal?*, is more uptight than Cher's cheeks after a facelift. In one episode of the new series by Simon Nye, she is bemoaning the fact that everyone at her drab solicitors' office in Hounslow hates her because she is so efficient. "I have to be the Iron Lady and Miss Whiplash," she wails, before whingeing about being missed off the sticky bun run.

Simultaneously strong and sad: there aren't many actors who could pull off that tricky combination. Nye, who also writes *Men Behaving Badly*, explains: "Stella is the person who makes it clear it's a proper office. Sometimes she has to be quite schoolmarm—and she hates it. That's a paradox in lots of jobs—in politics as well: you do it for the good of the downtrodden, but end up being a downtreader."

Beryl Vertue, the show's producer, takes up the theme. "She has to wield the heavy stick. At the same time, she has not to lose the friendship of the audience. Imelda's got this warmth, so you go with her. You can alienate an audience with a tough character, but she's able to mount that."

James Rampton, *Imelda Staunton: Big in Hounslow*, THE INDEPENDENT (London), Oct. 19, 1996, at 45 (Television).

Bob [trying to be sympathetic]: They all laughed, didn't they?

Stella [indignant]: No! Actually, most of them thought it was a very good idea.

Bob [realizing his faux pas]: Good. Quite right.

Stella: But I didn't become the best solicitor in the country, or in London, or probably even in Hounslow.⁶⁹

Viewing herself as a "serial divorcee . . . propping up a joke solicitor,"⁷⁰ Stella drowned her sorrows in alcohol, a fact that caused her considerable angst because it undercut her self-image as a solid citizen and lawyer.⁷¹ As she confided to Colin: "I used to have the world at my feet and now, well, I ooze frustration from every pore like, like a bloody monkey in a cage too small to stand up in!"⁷²

Short in stature, Stella suffered from a classic Napoleonic complex and hungered for success (which she often found in court, where she was a fierce advocate for personal injury victims). After joining LSP in 1978 as a secretary,⁷³ she fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming a solicitor by attending law school at night.⁷⁴ Her closest friend was Bob, the firm's office manager.⁷⁵ When Bob got married,

⁶⁹ "Colin Heals the World," *supra* note 52.

⁷⁰ "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

⁷¹ Stella's drinking eventually caused her to get a ticket:

Stella: I was arrested for drink [sic] driving last night.

Dick: Ahhh, welcome to the human race.

Stella: I am not like that! I mean I don't drink. And there I was in a pub swallowing gins like a bloody sea lion because my life and career are going nowhere. I mean I used to be happy and ambitious and suddenly I wake up one morning and fifteen years have gone by and I'm still here!

"Whodunnit?," *supra* note 49.

⁷² *Is It Legal?*, Episode 14 ("Indecision") (ITV, first broadcast Dec. 5, 1996).

⁷³ It is possible that Stella had an affair with Colin's dad shortly after she was hired. When an old love letter turned up in a long-forgotten case file, Stella vehemently denied anything happened. As the episode ended, however, she was seen standing in the middle of the office, holding the letter, and saying, enigmatically and with a far-off look on her face, "Anyway, didn't really mean a thing." "1979," *supra* note 53.

⁷⁴ As Stella explained, "I joined this firm as a secretary, like Alison, but with less shopping. I studied law in my spare time when all my friends were at discotheques. And seven long years later . . . I was being photographed in my graduation robes in a wind-swept car park[.]" *Is It Legal?*, Episode 19 ("New Bloke") (Channel 4, first broadcast Nov. 25, 1998).

⁷⁵ Despite this fact Bob was very afraid of Stella:

Colin: Why don't you just tell Stella [about the mistake]?

Stella was his best man (a fact made plausible by her androgynous looks and severe wardrobe), and the two regularly turned to each other in times of stress.⁷⁶

Stella was constantly on the lookout for ways to either break free of LSP or, if she had to stay, change it, for as she told Dick, "This firm is so inept it makes me want to cry."⁷⁷ Like many lawyers, Stella's lack of a personal life caused her to pour all of her energies into her professional one.⁷⁸

D. Bob Birch

Without a doubt, the show's most tormented character was office manager Bob Birch (Patrick Barlow).⁷⁹ Having gone into law

Bob: For the same reason that I don't blindfold myself and walk out into the M4 in the rush hour!

"Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

⁷⁶ In describing their relationship, Bob observed, "We've been through rather a rough patch in recent years. Now we cling to each other like survivors, a lot like Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet at the end of the *Titanic*, only transposed to a small solicitors' [office] in Hounslow." "Glad to Be Colin," *supra* note 35.

Although Stella expected to get sympathy from Bob, she often failed to give it in return. Thus, for example, when Bob revealed that his marriage was not going well, Stella replied, "Well, who was it who said marriage is like being stabbed repeatedly but without the same excitement?" "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

⁷⁷ "Whodunnit?," *supra* note 49.

Stella tried to leave the firm at the end of Season 1, see *infra* note 129 and accompanying text, and lobbied to have the firm sell itself to a rival at the end of Season 2. See *infra* note 130 and accompanying text. When Dick retired at the start of Season 3, Stella immediately set out to remake the firm:

Oh Bob, I'm quite excited actually. When I told people Dick had retired I think the reaction was very much, uh, you know, how can they tell? So I feel now I can really do something with this firm but I'm relying on you, as my closest ally and confidant, to really help me.

"A Question of Pants," *supra* note 35.

⁷⁸ As a result, whenever things went wrong in her professional life Stella had nothing to fall back on, which caused her to then question her legal abilities. Thus, for example, when her authority was challenged by a new contract lawyer, she retreated to her office and later pleaded with Bob to tell her whether she was "a bit of a fraud." "New Bloke," *supra* note 74.

⁷⁹ Bob was a "legal executive," which meant that he was law-trained but not a lawyer. As has been explained elsewhere, a "legal executive is an invaluable person in a solicitor's office, similar to a very well prepared and respected American paralegal." Kevin M. Teeven, *An American Lawyer's View of English Legal Education*, 11 N. KY. L. REV. 355, 363 (1984).

because his beloved Uncle Bob was a Coventry solicitor,⁸⁰ Bob had been at the firm since 1979.⁸¹ Although quite competent at his job,

On a day-to-day basis, Bob was treated quite well by Dick, Stella, and Colin, although there were moments when they reminded him that he was not their equal. Thus, for example, when the firm had to decide who would represent it on a call-in radio show, Bob very much wanted the assignment but Stella nixed the idea:

Bob: Is it so ridiculous that I should go on the radio?

Stella: Bob, Bob, Bob, Bob, Bob, Bobby. You're not even a qualified solicitor, you're a legal executive.

Bob: It's a respectable profession! We do have our own institute you know.

Stella: With all due respect, so do roofers, prostitutes, and dog handlers.

Bob: You said this morning that if I was more assertive I could be a top solicitor.

Stella [having had enough of the argument]: I'm sorry, I can't let an unqualified member of staff represent the firm on the public media.

"Hounslow F.M.," *supra* note 56.

To break their stalemate, Bob and Stella spoke to Dick and eventually agreed on a complicated arrangement that involved all of them appearing on the program and dividing the questions. In the meantime, however, Colin took matters into his own hands and went down to the station. Although he initially did quite well, things went awry when the final caller asked if he was responsible for killing his neighbors' cat by forgetting to feed it:

Colin: Well, sometimes notions of tolerance and give and take might be more appropriate, as here. Or you can, of course, hire a local solicitor to arbitrate for both of you.

Alison [listening with Dick, Stella, and Bob back at the firm]: He's quite good, isn't he?

[Begrudging murmurs of agreement are heard from Dick, Stella, and Bob.]

Colin: Or you can make up to your friends by offering to be their slave for a day, or something.

Alison [reconsidering]: Maybe not so good.

Id.

⁸⁰ In real life, Barlow came from a long line of lawyers, a fact that came in handy when he was cast as Bob:

Patrick is back on screen tonight in the hit sitcom *Is It Legal?* (ITV, 8:30pm) and admits he sympathises with the character he plays—lovelorn legal clerk Bob whose quest to date sandwich delivery girl Sarah (Nicole Arumugam) is fruitless.

"He's like I was when I was a student—always falling in love with unsuitable people and worshipping them from afar," he says. "Deep down, Bob knows his love for Sarah will never be reciprocated."

For the show, which was scripted by *Men Behaving Badly* creator Simon Nye, Patrick drew on real-life experience—because his family is largely made up of solicitors.

"My grandfather, father and now my brother have all worked in the family firm," he says.

Bob was plagued by doubt and insecurity, regretted not doing more with his career, and was trapped in a loveless marriage to a woman named Virginia. Yet when he daydreamed, his aspirations were exceedingly low:

Stella: Bob, have you ever, have you ever thought of chucking it all in and starting a new life with a new identity?

Bob [visibly excited]: Yes! Actually, I used to have a fantasy that my name was Bill and I worked as office manager for a legal practice in Hatton Cross.

Stella: That's not actually very different from your life now, is it?

Bob [sadly]: No, not really.⁸²

As the series began, Bob (who was a bit pudgy and favored cardigans) was suffering through a full-blown mid-life crisis, having developed a hopeless crush on Sarah, the delivery girl who worked at Mr. Bappy.⁸³ Tongue-tied whenever she was nearby, Bob became the store's best customer—despite not actually eating its sand-

"In the show we're totally inept, and losing money, and trying to rip people off. Thankfully my own family's firm would never do that. I was very nervous about their reaction after the first [season], and to be honest, they weren't ecstatic. They were holding something back. I suspect my brother might be thinking twice about doing my conveyancing for free next time I move [to a new] house."

Richard Wallace, *I Fall for the Wrong Girl Every Time*, DAILY MIRROR (London), Oct. 24, 1996, at 1 (Features).

⁸¹ Bob joined LSP shortly after Stella:

Bob: I can still remember when I arrived actually. I was greeted by this small keen young woman with frizzy hair and slightly steamed up glasses. She had only been here less than a year.

Colin: So she must have joined around the same time as Stella.

Bob: It was Stella Colin.

"Polishing the Mouse," *supra* note 35.

⁸² "Indecision," *supra* note 72.

⁸³ When Alison pointed out that Sarah was "only a woman," a disbelieving Bob demanded to know, "Was Cleopatra only a woman? Was Evonne Goolagong only a woman? Audrey Hepburn. Was she only a woman?" "Alison Gets Laid," *supra* note 55.

Sarah, who had a good head on her shoulders, eventually left Mr. Bappy and returned to school:

Colin: You used to deliver baps to our office, didn't you?

Sarah: Yes, but I've moved on since then.

Colin. Uh-huh. Cakes?

Sarah: No, I'm halfway through a course in speech therapy.

"Glad to Be Colin," *supra* note 35.

wiches,⁸⁴ which he stuffed in his desk drawer until it was overflowing⁸⁵—in the hopes that he might one day be able to tell Sarah his true feelings.

Bob's charming but clumsy attempts to woo Sarah were a running storyline throughout the show's first two seasons. After he realized he had no hope of being successful, Bob began an affair with Stella. During the third season, Bob was torn between continuing to sleep with Stella and resuming his pursuit of Sarah. In the meantime, Sarah began dating Colin and eventually slept with him.⁸⁶

E. Alison

The firm's secretarial duties were the responsibility of the sexy Alison (Kate Isitt), although it was clear from the moment we met her that the strawberry blond had no interest in performing them. A fashion clotheshorse who, by her own admission, only "really comes alive in the evenings,"⁸⁷ Alison spent her days reading magazines, thinking up new ways to do even less work, and trying to get a raise.⁸⁸ As she told Bob: "I hate solicitors. You shouldn't need them. I hate them even though I work for one. That's the irony."⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Bob could not have the sandwiches because he had "a debilitating allergy to bread." *Is It Legal?*, Episode 5 ("Infatuation") (ITV, first broadcast Oct. 10, 1995).

Although cheese salad was Mr. Bappy's most popular sandwich, Bob made it a point to order highly unusual combinations (such as coleslaw and cornflakes) to make him more memorable to Sarah. Like everything else he did to win her affection, his strategy backfired:

Bob: You're probably wondering why I have such specialized fillings for my baps.

Sarah: Not really. Someone suggested that you'd lost part of your bowel. "Whodunnit?," *supra* note 49.

⁸⁵ The sight of Bob squirreling away uneaten sandwiches was just one of the show's many marvelous sight gags. In an even funnier bit, Bob later inherited his Uncle Bob's desk. Although he could not wait to get it delivered, when it showed up at the office it was so large that it made him look like a child, leading to endless ribbing by the others, who insisted on adding the word "desk" to his name. "Big Desk Bob," *supra* note 58.

⁸⁶ Because the show was cancelled without a proper finale, viewers never found out how Colin and Sarah's relationship turned out. Of course, many television shows end without having a chance to wrap up loose ends. See TV TROPES, *Cut Short*, at <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CutShort> (last visited July 1, 2011).

⁸⁷ "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

⁸⁸ During the show's first season, Nye was forced to remind the public that Alison was not meant to be an indictment of all secretaries:

As she repeatedly made clear, Alison found offices boring and believed they caused the people in them to go "peculiar."⁹⁰ In one scene, she was seen pounding on her typewriter while wailing that she was "bored, bored, bored," to which an exasperated Bob replied, "You've only been here two minutes. Your coat is still moving!"⁹¹

Alison had a particularly difficult relationship with Stella, who viewed her as a bad influence on the rest of the staff.⁹² Thus, shortly before Colin began, Stella reminded her to be on her best behavior:

Stella: Colin Lotus is about to join us as you know. What are we not going to do Alison?

Alison: Lure him into the snake pit of our cynicism.

Stella: And what are we going to do?

"It is difficult not to stereotype a secretary and I hope I haven't. Those I came in contact with were all rather fierce, and I think that comes across in Alison."

Alison is the blonde, long-legged, twenty-something secretary who works for Lotus Spackman and Phelps solicitors and spends her days reading magazines and thinking about the next party.

"She is bored and needs a job more suited to her character," says Nye. "But she is on top of things and in control of the men in the office." Secretaries on television today do not have affairs with the boss, and Alison is forthright and unfeeling when rejecting advances.

Nye says he receives criticism that the show is not entirely real but Kate Isitt, who plays Alison, says the character is more true to life than is sometimes assumed. Having been a temp while looking for acting work, Isitt says she can sympathise with her character.

"When I read the part of Alison I thought, 'I know this girl so well,'" Isitt says. "I hated most of the secretarial jobs I did and at 3pm it was all I could do to keep my head off the desk. A lot of secretaries feel like that, and those with any initiative can end up running an office for no thanks."

Isitt admits secretaries do not generally get a good press but says although her character is entirely self-interested, she is competent and gets the work done.

"People have this image of them powdering their noses, and there are those. But there are many secretaries running offices for their higher paid boss, so Alison's character can be misleading."

Jennai Cox, *Office Typcasting*, THE TIMES (U.K.), Nov. 1, 1995, at 39.

⁸⁹ "Dick's House of Horror," *supra* note 53.

⁹⁰ "Whodunnit?," *supra* note 49.

⁹¹ *Id.*

⁹² When Stella asked Alison "what is holding you back from being a better member of staff?," Alison replied, "I don't know. Pride?" "Glad to Be Colin," *supra* note 35.

Alison: Suck on the lollipop of his enthusiasm.

Stella: Well remembered.⁹³

When Colin later showed up, Stella wasted little time making her feelings known to him:

Stella: Well, you haven't met Alison.

Colin: Hello.

Alison: [Nods.]

Stella: She romped home at this year's "Hounslow and District Most Bored Secretary" awards.⁹⁴

Not surprisingly, Stella wanted to fire Alison. She could not, however, due to the fact that Alison's boyfriend Steve (Andrew Clover) was a real estate agent who contributed to LSP's bottom line by sending it closings and title work. Powerless to do anything, Stella largely ignored Alison but occasionally pulled rank. When Alison was unable to stay awake at work after attending a late night rave, for example, Stella warned her:

Alison, you have a job here because your boyfriend is an estate agent. And in these difficult times, frankly, solicitors would rather submit to a public flogging than offend—[leans over and slaps Alison, who has again fallen asleep]. Even so, if you are not alert for the rest of the day I will sack you and give you a reference so damning employers won't only refuse to employ you they'll want to tie you to a desk and slap you until you bleed. Is that clear enough?⁹⁵

Rather than be offended by Stella's outbursts, Alison often responded to them with a wry insult that reminded viewers she had a clever streak. That Alison knew more than she let on was made especially clear when Dick asked her to help him prepare for an appearance as a legal expert on a local radio show:

Dick: I need some practice Alison. Pretend you are ringing into a radio station with a legal problem.

Alison: Ok. [Sits down and pretends to make a phone call.] Hello?

Dick: Hello.

Alison: Is that [the] so-called legal expert?

Dick: Yes. And what can I do for you?

Alison: My husband stopped my maintenance payments and I don't know whether to sue him through the Magistrates' Court or apply for a maintenance enforcement order.

⁹³ "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

⁹⁴ *Id.*

⁹⁵ "Dick's House of Horror," *supra* note 53.

Dick [flustered]: Well, yes, yes, that's quite, um, technical. Ask me another.

Alison: I killed my lover this morning with our toaster.

Dick [startled]: You didn't, did you?

Alison [rolling her eyes while continuing]: Am I allowed to use PMT as a legal defense or did I read that that was ruled inadmissible recently by the Law Lords?

Dick [even more flustered]: I don't want to discuss ladies' collywobbles in front of the listeners.

Alison: You don't know, do you?

Dick: Okay, shut up caller.

Alison [starting yet another question]: I've been unfairly dismissed—

Dick [throwing Alison out of his office]: Yes, thank you caller, that's all your time.⁹⁶

Alison was, above all else, an opportunist, and she was quite willing to take advantage of any situation. When it appeared that Bob might be fired for one of her mistakes, she asked, "When you've gone, can I have your parking space?"⁹⁷ One thing she would not do, however, was come to the aid of others, for as she noted, "I tried helping someone once. It wasn't really me."⁹⁸

F. Darren

The final principal character was Darren (Matthew Ashforde), the firm's wiry gofer.⁹⁹ Decidedly blue collar, he was the youngest employee and the most casually dressed, favoring sweatshirts and baseball caps worn backwards.¹⁰⁰ His slang-infected speech often proved a challenge to the others:

Dick: Morning. Uh, where is everyone?

Darren: Colin is sorting out some old stiff's clover.

Dick [interpreting]: Colin is visiting a probate client.

⁹⁶ "Hounslow F.M.," *supra* note 56.

The abbreviation "PMT" stands for "pre-menstrual tension." For a case in which a murder suspect successfully used PMT as part of her defense, see *R. v. Reynolds*, [1988] Crim. L.R. 679 (C.A.).

⁹⁷ "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

⁹⁸ "Whodunnit?," *supra* note 49.

⁹⁹ We did not learn Darren's last name (McClarren) until very late in the series, when he decided he wanted to change his first name to Fenton so that his full name no longer rhymed. "New Bloke," *supra* note 74.

¹⁰⁰ Darren's wardrobe underwent an unexplained transformation when the show moved from ITV to Channel 4, see *supra* notes 31-33 and accompanying text, as he traded in his previous attire for a button-down shirt and tie.

Darren: Bob's whacking some paper off down at the beaks.

Dick: Bob is filing documents with the court.

Darren: And totty's gassing in piglet's gaff.

Dick: And Alison is in Stella's office having a chat. I'm starting to get the hang of you Darren.¹⁰¹

Between assignments Darren retreated to the firm's file room, which he had outfitted as his personal office and where he indulged his passion for rap music.¹⁰² Sexually immature, he had an undisguised crush on Alison, who enjoyed teasing him and making him do personal errands, such as ironing her clothes and washing her car.¹⁰³ Although he complained regularly about how much work he did and considered himself underpaid, Stella viewed him as a slacker:

Stella: What marks would you give yourself for your work this year, Darren, out of 10?

Darren: Nine.

Stella: Let's suggest a more realistic figure.

Darren: Three?

Stella: No, I thought none.

Darren: Out of 10? Isn't that a bit low?

Stella: Yes. On the other hand, it is higher than last year, when I suggested you scored—how many?

Darren: Minus 16.

Stella: Yes, so well done on your improvement.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ "Solicitors in Love," *supra* note 43.

¹⁰² In addition to rap, Darren was into painting and computers. While he was terrible at the former, he was very good at the latter. When he hacked into Stella's hard drive and discovered she was planning to fire him, for example, he sabotaged the firm's new computer system, thereby saving his job by proving how much he was needed. "Darren's Revenge," *supra* note 47.

Like other law firms, LSP's attempt to keep up with technology often proved bumpy:

Colin [struggling to master his new computer]: Ah, it's exciting, isn't it?

Bob: What?

Colin: Computers. The Computer Age. The planet in a box. Cyberspace. Booting up your mega floppy. World Wide Web. World.

Alison: What are you talking about?

Colin: I don't know.

Id.

¹⁰³ When Colin suggested she was taking advantage of Darren, Alison replied that he enjoyed being her "slave." *Is It Legal?*, Episode 6 ("Bob Breaks In") (ITV, first broadcast Oct. 17, 1995).

¹⁰⁴ "Solicitors in Love," *supra* note 43. In many ways, Darren was a composite of Gary and Tony from *Men Behaving Badly*, see *supra* note 13, although he was neither as ambitious as Gary nor as lazy as Tony.

Despite his shortcomings, Darren was kept on because he was willing to work cheap¹⁰⁵ and, unlike Alison, followed direct orders, although not always in the way they were meant to be carried out.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, when it came time to sign his birthday card Stella wrote: "Happy birthday Darren. Don't hesitate if you ever want to leave the firm."¹⁰⁷

IV EPISODES

The scripts of *Is It Legal?* tackled an astonishing number of moral conundrums in a highly believable manner. In doing so, a good deal of time was necessarily spent educating viewers about the Law Society and its rules.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Darren was able to work for low wages because he lived with his parents "in a nice house by a park." "Indecision," *supra* note 72. He admitted, however, that he would like to make enough money to be able to have sex with his girlfriend Yvonne (Louise Rolfe) in his "own car" rather than in automobiles belonging to strangers. "Someone Is Lying," *supra* note 57.

¹⁰⁶ Thus, for example, when a Mr. Dinenage, one of Stella's clients, got into an argument with his neighbor over a gazebo, the man painted, in 14-foot blue letters, the word "sod" on Mr. Dinenage's house. After Bob suggested turning the "o" into an "a" to tone down the insult and Alison raised the possibility of adding an "a" (to make it spell "soda"), Stella sent Darren to take care of the problem. But instead of washing the graffiti off Mr. Dinenage's property, he painted, in equally large red letters, the word "git" on the neighbor's house. "Hounslow F.M.," *supra* note 56.

¹⁰⁷ "Dick's House of Horror," *supra* note 53.

¹⁰⁸ Founded in 1825, the Law Society of England and Wales (www.lawsociety.org.uk) oversaw the admission, conduct, and disciplining of solicitors until 2007, when it delegated its regulatory authority to the Solicitors Regulation Authority (www.sra.org.uk). For a copy of the Law Society's rules as they existed when Nye first began writing *Is It Legal?*, see THE GUIDE TO THE PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT OF SOLICITORS (Stephen Hammett et al. eds., 6th ed. 1993). See also Karen L.K. Miller, *Zip to Nil? A Comparison of American and English Lawyers' Standards of Professional Conduct*, CA32 ALI-ABA 199 (Aug. 16, 1995), particularly Appendix B (a helpful chart showing the differences between the various solicitor codes and the ABA's Model Rules of Professional Conduct).

Realizing that most viewers would be unfamiliar with the Law Society's rules, Nye took pains to explain them in a sensible, non-technical way. Thus, for example, after mentioning to a paramedic that he was not yet a full-fledged lawyer, Colin continued: "I've just started my articles. Work experience kind of a thing. I suppose I'm like a lorry driver who's studied his maps and packed his lunchbox and now has to get out on the road." "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

That the Law Society's rules proscribed certain conduct was made clear in the show's first episode, after Colin managed to accidentally kill a Mr. Dobson (Charles Simon), an elderly client who was just about to sign his will.¹⁰⁹ As the will included a £20,000 bequest to the firm,¹¹⁰ Dick and Stella found themselves in a debate over what to do next:

Dick: I don't see an ethical problem.

Stella: You're a solicitor and you don't see the ethical problem in forging a signature?

Dick: Well, well, you call it forging, I call it honoring a dying man's wishes.

Stella: And what do you call fabricating the two witnesses Colin forgot to arrange? Do you think you can break every rule in the Law Society's Code of Practice?

Dick: Oh, are they having one of their competitions?¹¹¹

Being the senior partner, Dick brushed aside Stella's concerns and asked Alison and Darren to witness the will. This led to an exchange that revealed much about the characters:

Alison: No, this has got to be witnessed on signature. I can't sign that. It would be wrong.

Dick: Wrong? When you come down to it, wrong's a pretty meaningless word, isn't it?

Alison: It's illegal.

Dick: Illegal. That's a funny old fashioned word, too.

[Alison and Darren stand firm.]

Dick: Fifty pounds each.

[Alison and Darren jump to sign the document.]

Dick: Thank you.

[As Alison and Darren turn to leave, Dick calls Darren back.]

¹⁰⁹ Seeing that Mr. Dobson needed a pen, Colin had slid forward a pen set his parents had given him as a law school graduation gift. As he did so, Mr. Dobson unexpectedly bent his head down and was impaled on the set's letter opener. When he later recounted the accident to Dick and Stella, however, Colin claimed he was "sliding the thing across, out of [Mr. Dobson's] way." *Id.*

¹¹⁰ Mr. Dobson explained that he was making the gift because Colin's father "did a lot for me over the years." *Id.* While Rule 1.8(c) of the ABA Model Rules bans such gifts in most circumstances, at the time of the episode there was no equivalent prohibition in English law. See Miller, *supra* note 108, at App. B. Today, LSP would have to advise Mr. Dobson to seek independent counsel. See SOLICITORS REGULATION AUTHORITY, *Solicitors' Code of Conduct 2007*, available at <http://www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/code-of-conduct/rule3.page> (last visited July 1, 2011) (under "Rule 3.04—Accepting Gifts From Clients").

¹¹¹ "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

Dick: Have you ever forged a dead man's signature before?

Darren: No.

Dick [holding up another fifty pound note]: It's sensationally easy.¹¹²

With the will executed, it appeared that Dick would have to decide whether he was really willing to risk his license (and possibly much more) to cash in on the bequest. But before viewers could learn the answer, fate stepped in and made the question moot:

Bob [entering a closed door meeting of the partners]: I'm tendering my resignation.

Stella: Why?

Bob [speaking haltingly]: I allowed Alison to accidentally shred the bonds that Mr. Dobson left us in his will. My negligence has cost this firm £20,000.

[Camera pans the room, showing a shaken Dick, Stella, and Colin.]

Stella [speaking quietly]: Bob, you hold this place together. None of us here is going to let you throw it all away.¹¹³

The fact that lawyers are often tempted by their clients' money served as the basis of another episode a few weeks later. Lacking the cash to buy a yacht he desperately wanted, Dick raided the firm's trust account and took £34,000 that belonged to a client named Belinda Foulkes (Patricia Garwood). But after owning the vessel for just a few days, Dick learned that Ms. Foulkes, who had not been heard from for some time, was on her way to the office. When Stella insisted he put the money back before she arrived, Dick was forced to sell the boat to Colin at a substantial loss.¹¹⁴

Just when viewers thought the story was over, Nye revealed the final irony: in the interim, Dick's Uncle Scott had passed away. For some time, Dick had been counting on his rich relative to die, and now that he had Dick could afford to buy the boat back from Colin. Unfortunately, Colin had grown fond of the idea of being a sailor and therefore declined Dick's entreaties.

Money ended up figuring in many of the show's storylines. When Colin, anxious to cut his teeth on criminal defense work, went looking for clients, he encountered a beautiful (but hard-edged) prosti-

¹¹² *Id.*

¹¹³ *Id.*

¹¹⁴ Despite being a junior solicitor, Colin was able to afford the purchase because, as Dick reminded him, "I know that your father left you rather a good sum on his retirement." "Bob Breaks In," *supra* note 103.

tute named Jane (Charlotte Weston).¹¹⁵ Although Jane was willing to hire Colin, she asked to pay his fee "in-kind." This led Colin to seek Dick out for advice regarding the propriety of the proposal:

Colin: May I ask you an ethical question?

Dick [flustered]: Well, well, it's not really my area of expertise.

Colin: This is just a basic, general ethical question.

Dick [trying to shoo Colin away]: Well, it's, it's still not really my area. Perhaps you could get a book about it.

Colin: Say someone came to you and offered you an inducement to do some work for them. Would you?

Dick: Yes, we call it a fee.

Colin: Aha, yes, now what if this fee took the form of benefits-in-kind?

Dick: What, a crate of whiskey? That sort of chap?

Colin: Yes, that sort of chap.

Dick: Well, I would enjoy it first, ask questions later.

Colin: Oh, good, good. That's all I wanted to hear.

Dick: Assuming of course—

Colin: Don't say any more.

Dick: As long as we get our fee as well.

Colin: Oh.¹¹⁶

In the same episode, Stella put herself at risk by telling a personal injury client she had obtained a £40,000 settlement when, in fact, the insurance company's current offer was just £10,000. Unwilling to call the client back and tell him the truth, she decided she would, if necessary, make up the difference herself. This caused Bob to caution Colin about becoming too involved in his cases:

Bob: Stella's waiting to hear whether she's promised away £30,000 of her own money.

Colin: Wow, that is so easy to do.

Bob: That's what happens when you get emotionally involved in your cases. Must keep that professional distance.

Colin [still unsure what to do about Jane]: Of course, very important, professional distance. Best not even to touch.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Colin found Jane while handing out his business cards at the local police station. Because § 3 of the Solicitors' Publicity Code 1990 prohibited such advertising, at the end of the episode Stella got a call "from a court usher complaining that Colin has been openly touting for business." "Colin Heals the World," *supra* note 52. For a discussion of § 3 (as well as its United States counterpart, ABA Model Rule 7.3), see Louise L. Hill, *Lawyer Publicity in the European Union: Bans Are Removed But Barriers Remain*, 29 GEO. WASH. J. INT'L L. & ECON. 381, 402, 413 (1995).

¹¹⁶ "Colin Heals the World," *supra* note 52.

¹¹⁷ *Id.*

In the end, the insurer increased its offer to £40,000. Colin, however, was not as lucky. After agreeing to Jane's terms, he fainted before he could consummate their bargain.

In addition to money, *Is It Legal?* explored other aspects of the ethics rules, with conflicts of interest and self-dealing at the head of the list. As it happened, most of these situations involved Bob.¹¹⁸

Thus, for example, when Darren decided to sue Mr. Bappy (which was already experiencing hard times) for selling him a fish paste sandwich that gave him food poisoning, Bob tried to talk him out of the idea so that Sarah's job would be safe.¹¹⁹ Likewise, when Bob hired an incompetent surveyor named Mr. Arnold (Michael Troughton) to look over the house Dick was planning to buy, he enlisted Colin to help him cover up his mistake.¹²⁰ And when Alison accidentally shredded a "before" picture of one of Stella's clients (a tall black boxer suing a plastic surgeon for a botched nose job), Bob substituted a photograph of a small white boxer and hoped no one would notice.¹²¹

Bob's most underhanded act came when Sarah, having returned from a lengthy visit to Wales, asked him to represent her and her boyfriend Tom (Ben Miles) in buying an apartment. After agreeing to help, he did everything he could to prolong the transaction:

Bob: Sarah Chivers is popping by to sign some paperwork.

Stella: Again? How many times have you made that poor girl come into the office?

Bob: A couple.

Alison: Eight!

Stella: How many times did you make Nigel Frampton come in when you were doing his conveyancing?

¹¹⁸ As a legal executive, see *supra* note 79, Bob was subject to the Code of Conduct of the Institute of Legal Executives (www.ilex.org.uk). See Andrew M. Francis, *Legal Ethics, Moral Agency and Professional Autonomy: The Unbearable Ethics of Being (a Legal Executive)?*, 10 LEGAL ETHICS 131 (2007).

¹¹⁹ "Infatuation," *supra* note 84.

¹²⁰ "Dick's House of Horror," *supra* note 53. While the house turned out to be fine structurally, Bob and Colin missed the fact that it was located next to "Fleetline," a 24-hour helicopter service. This tidbit was revealed in the episode's final scene, when Dick, hosting a housewarming party, was forced to watch helplessly while one of the helicopters upended the food that his caterer had so carefully laid out.

¹²¹ "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

Bob: Once.
 Stella: Timothy Fong?
 Bob: Once.
 Stella: The Drabble sisters?
 Bob: Yes, we did that by fax.¹²²

Meanwhile, Alison, acting on an £80 bet with Bob, seduced Tom, causing him to leave Sarah (after which Alison, having proved she could get any man into bed, dumped him).¹²³

Still later, when Sarah turned up needing a will, Bob insisted on handling the matter even though his specialty was property. Following a hurried tutorial from Colin,¹²⁴ Bob attempted to pass himself off but Sarah easily saw through him:

Sarah: I know you're great with property, but are you used to doing wills?
 Bob: Wills? God yes. God yes.
 Sarah: Because it's actually quite a complicated situation. Because I've got a small trust fund set up for me. [Pulls out an enormous stack of papers.]
 Bob [surprised by their size]: A big folder. I used to be rather obsessed by you.
 Sarah: Well I did wonder. But you're okay now?
 Bob: Oh yes. . . .
 [Bob begins trying to discuss sex, but Sarah steers the conversation back to the reason for her visit.]
 Sarah: Apparently, I need a codicil exempting me from a gray form or something and providing for revision in the event of co-trusteeship.
 Bob [shuffling through the papers in Sarah's folder, looking lost]: Uh-huh.
 Sarah: Sorry, you don't know what you're doing, do you?
 Bob: No.
 Sarah: Who do I need to speak to?
 Bob [dejectedly]: Colin.¹²⁵

Bob, however, was not alone in his willingness to exploit a situation for his own benefit. When Colin had the opportunity to sleep

¹²² "Dick in Court," *supra* note 62.

¹²³ "Alison Gets Laid," *supra* note 55.

¹²⁴ After initially protesting that he was "the wills guy," Colin agreed to help Bob but then took the task too seriously:

Colin: Well the phrase "last will and testament" derives from the original division between the will, which related to land, and testament, which related to all other property.

Bob: I've only got seven minutes.

"Glad to Be Colin," *supra* note 35.

¹²⁵ *Id.*

with the wife of one his clients—an inmate named Terry Beath (Ian Bartholomew)—he took it, even though he had been hired to learn whether the woman was being faithful.¹²⁶ Likewise, when Dick retired from the firm, Colin moved into his office, even though Bob wanted it (and, as Stella acknowledged, deserved it).¹²⁷

When she received a ticket for drunk driving, Stella vowed to pay it—until Dick convinced her to let him fix it by calling in a favor from a friend at the Hounslow police station.¹²⁸ But when Stella was invited to join Sharkey McBain, a more prestigious law firm, Dick

¹²⁶ "Office Party," *supra* note 53.

¹²⁷ "A Question of Pants," *supra* note 35.

The issue of where Colin should sit had been festering since the show's beginning. Although he had hoped to be given his father's office, in the first episode Dick and Stella turned it into a conference room and placed Colin in the firm's outer office (a bullpen-like area), alongside Bob and Alison:

Mr. Dobson: Your colleagues must have great faith in you to give you his old room.

Colin: Absolutely. [Reconsiders his answer.] No, uh, apparently I'm only allowed to use it at weekends and the odd afternoon. They want me picking up experience out there, in what I call the Bermuda Triangle.

Mr. Dobson: Why the Bermuda Triangle?

Colin: Because it's sort of triangular.

Mr. Dobson [looking at the space]: No it isn't.

Colin [sheepishly]: No, it isn't.

"Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

Colin's move to Dick's office proved short-lived—after he accidentally locked himself in one of its closets, he returned (without explanation) to the bullpen. As for Dick's office, it was not seen again until near the end of the series, when it was used by Nick Lester (Alexander Armstrong), a contract lawyer Stella hired to handle an uptick in work. "New Bloke," *supra* note 74.

¹²⁸ "Whodunnit?," *supra* note 49.

Throughout the show's run, the subject of alcohol was never far from the surface—an unsurprising fact given Nye's pre-occupation with the topic in *Men Behaving Badly*. See *supra* note 13. Thus, for example, in the first episode of *Is It Legal?*, Stella chided Dick for thinking sherry can always make things right: "Yes, that is your answer to everything, isn't it? Probate problems? Have a sherry. Beaten someone to death with a barstool? Have a sherry." "Death in Hounslow," *supra* note 42.

In a later episode, Stella, Bob, Alison, and Darren got drunk while entertaining clients at an open house. The next morning, they turned up at the office looking terrible and nursing hangovers. Just as they began to sober up—signaled by Stella observing, "You know you're on the mend when your hair stops hurting"—they were mortified to discover that their night of debauchery had been caught on a police surveillance tape. "Office Party," *supra* note 53.

blackmailed Roger Sharkey into rescinding his offer.¹²⁹ Similarly, when LSP received an offer to merge with Scamp, Henderson & Dolby, which Stella very much wanted to accept so she could start a new life, Dick and Colin rejected the overture.¹³⁰

The idea of lawyers backstabbing and being backstabbed especially interested Nye. Thus, in the show's fifth episode, a dashing law student named Peter (Raymond Coulthard) joined LSP. Dick immediately took a shine to him due to their shared interest in golf; Stella and Alison did everything they could to sleep with him; Colin considered him to be a fellow member "of the new wave of young lawyers [who are] very exciting and radical . . . [and] changing things";¹³¹ and Darren tried to retain him to handle his food poisoning case against Mr. Bappy.

Only Bob disliked him (especially after Peter asked Sarah for a date, an offer she readily accepted). As it turned out, his suspicions were well-founded. During an inadvertently-taped telephone call, Peter was heard making fun of everyone (except, ironically, Bob) and then saying, "The amazing thing is they think I want to join the firm and bury myself alive like them."¹³² After sending him packing, everyone joined Dick in his office for a much-needed sherry.

The firm was taken in by a different sort of imposter when, in the show's nineteenth episode, Stella hired a contract lawyer without doing a sufficient background check. Once again, it was Bob who discovered the deception:

Bob: I've telephoned the agency and, uh, they've looked more closely at Nick's references. Apparently one of his referees was P. Philip of Windsor. The other was Mr. Oliver of Fagin Cottages, High Wycombe. I have one of the letters he was writing—blank paper in it.

¹²⁹ "Resignation," *supra* note 60. As Stella explained at the start of the episode, years earlier Dick torpedoed an offer she received from a different firm by getting her drunk on sherry and then convincing her to call the senior partner and make a fool of herself.

¹³⁰ "Indecision," *supra* note 72. While Dick voted against the takeover for fear it would lead to his dismissal (although his stated reason was that the price being offered was too low), Colin, unsure what to do, called his parents' maid (Mrs. Mundy), who made the decision for him. (Viewers did not hear Mrs. Mundy's end of the conversation and Colin did not explain her reasoning.)

¹³¹ "Infatuation," *supra* note 84.

¹³² *Id.*

Stella [softly, realizing what has happened]: Right.
 Bob: And a toffee.
 Stella: A toffee?
 Bob: Hmm.
 Stella: Right.
 [Stella and Bob walk out of her office to tell the others.]
 Stella: Where's Nick?
 Alison: He had to get something out of his car.
 Stella: Can I just say—he isn't a solicitor.
 Bob: Apparently he just liked the idea of being one.
 Alison [incredulous]: He wanted to be a solicitor?
 Stella [clearly pained]: You've genuinely qualified, haven't you Colin?
 Colin: Yes.
 Stella: Good.
 Darren: Should I call the pigs?
 Bob [correcting Darren's use of slang]: Police.
 Stella: Let's just, uh, put this down to experience, shall we?¹³³

Although Nye reserved most of his jabs for the legal profession,¹³⁴ on occasion he also took shots at clients, such as the couple warring over their dog Malcolm.¹³⁵ Nye made his feelings about clients particularly clear in a later episode. After enduring a day of insults on the golf course, Stella was stunned to learn that a supremely obnoxious man named David Etherington (Chris Langham), who Dick thought he had landed as a client, had no intention of changing attorneys:

Stella: Well David, we'll be shooing off soon. So if you'd like to send Dick the work you want us to handle.
 David: No, thanks for lunch. But I always tend to use a solicitor chum for all my legal stuff.
 Stella: What?

¹³³ "New Bloke," *supra* note 74.

¹³⁴ One of his best came in the show's final episode:

Stella: I'm working on the [Hounslow] Home Improvement Center dispute with Payless Caravans.
 Colin: Ooh. Well that's been bubbling and stewing and boiling away for quite a while, hasn't it?
 Stella: Twenty-three years.
 Colin: Anybody winning?
 Stella: The legal profession.

"1979," *supra* note 53.

¹³⁵ See *supra* note 65 and accompanying text.

David: Well, if you're going to get ripped off by bloody solicitors it might as well be by a mate.¹³⁶

V

CONCLUSION

By any measure, *Is It Legal?* was a superb show. As such, its recent obscurity has been a true shame. Now that it is available on DVD, perhaps it will begin to be rediscovered.

¹³⁶ "Darren's Revenge," *supra* note 47.