



Hancock being sketched by Feliks Topolski for the caption card for Face to Face

About the Face to Face Interview

Face to Face was a TV show in which John Freeman, former editor of *The New Statesman* and later to become British Ambassador to the USA, asked straight forward and often probing questions to, usually, intellectually heavyweight personalities of the day. Hancock was as surprised as anybody when he was asked if he would like to participate in the show. After some deliberation Hancock agreed and the resulting examination of Hancock's troubled personality was so stark that the BBC had their doubts about whether or not it should be aired at all; indeed, Freeman was forced to write a letter to the Daily Telegraph following the broadcast to counter the public criticism his interview style had received.

Class-obsessed Freeman's manner was neither aggressive nor provocative but the questions were so forthright that, combined with the camera work of the show which focused almost exclusively on the face of the interviewee, the interview was more like a session on a psychiatrist's couch and Hancock, his whole id layed bare for public scrutiny, was made to look at times a rather pathetic victim and hopelessly aspiring intellectual.

This interview came at a time when Hancock was in a state of professional flux. He had just finished his last Hancock episode with Sid James and was about to start work on 'The Rebel'; in the interview, Hancock alludes to developments he has in mind for the character of "Hancock" but cannot give any details. The truth was that Hancock was heartily sick of the series as it was and wanted to, among other things, move from Railway Cuttings, drop the colloquialisms like "Stone Me", drop the Homburg hat and drop Sid James! The Face to Face interview had a profound effect on Hancock, causing him take a long look at himself and his life.

The Face to Face Interview

First Broadcast - June 1960

This is a full transcription of the interview including all the pauses in the speech, the ers, erms and repetitions. These nuances have been included to give the reader a feel for the atmosphere and mood of the interview and, more specifically, of Hancock.

Interview Transcription

Freeman:

Tony Hancock. The whole of Britain knows you in your professional comic mask...and tonight we want to try and find out what lies behind the mask. Now, are you in the mood to come clean?

Hancock:

Yes indeed.

Freeman:

You know you're on your own?

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

You're without your scriptwriters.

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

And you'll tell us the truth?

Hancock:

I'll try to, yes.

Freeman:

Do you like talking about yourself or not?

Hancock:

Erm, yes up to a point. Particularly in relation to what I do.

Freeman:

Well in that case...

Hancock:

...in relation to comedy, yes.

Freeman:

Alright. Now, I'll ask you first of all, why are you a comic?

Hancock:

Erm, well I think I always certainly wanted to be from the first time I can remember. And erm, perhaps looking like this it was perhaps the only thing I could do. So I turned these sort of deficiencies into a, a workable thing if you understand what I mean.

Freeman:

Yes, but let's go a bit deeper than that. Do you think the world is a comic place or is it a tragic place?

Hancock:

Oh I think it consists of the two things. It's both funny and sad which seem to me to be the two basic ingredients of good comedy.

Freeman:

"basic ingredients", what is being funny? Is it mixing them together? How do you tell what is funny?

Hancock:

Well I think they exist together anyway.

Freeman:

Yes.

Hancock:

By the way we live...erm, when we attempt to be affected or pompous or...er...how can I say? Erm, we are sort of all unsure of ourselves in what we live in...erm, we try to...live in a certain way. We try to...we are, I suppose to a certain extent all affected and erm, that is both funny and sad I think.

Freeman:

So that being funny is showing how people are affected? Is that what you're trying to say?

Hancock:

I think so. I think you expose your own pomposity and other peoples' and get probably to the real truth of the way you live.

Freeman:

And so that being funny is part of the business of finding out the truth about life?

Hancock:

Entirely.

Freeman:

Yes.

Hancock:

Not to do...you can't think of it in any other way.

Freeman:

Now, your own comedy character, the one we know in...

Hancock:

(laughs) Yes.

Freeman:

...Hancock's Half Hour.

Hancock:

Yes, yes...

Freeman:

...swagger, bluster and then, not being very effectual in the end. Is that right?

Hancock:

Er...I'm not entirely sure you can sort of really theorise entirely about these things. As I say, this is all sort of part of what you are and part of what everybody else is. It's er...a comment on yourself and a comment on everybody else I think.

Freeman:

Well now, how much is this a comment on yourself?

Hancock:

Oh to a great extent, to a great extent. I mean, shall we say, the character that I...it isn't a character I play, that I put on and off like a coat. It is er...greatly a part of me and a part of everybody else that I see.

Freeman:

Erm, are you trying to say with it something which is, which is serious? Is there a message or are you simply trying to make people laugh?

Hancock:

Erm...w...not exactly a message. I think if you go to that extent, I think perhaps you lose the...the intuitive thing which is bad...erm...no. I think it's just a true observation of the way things are, as far as you can see it yourself.

Freeman:

Looking at yourself as a comic after all in the, in the television and film era, you've seen yourself as a comic...

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

...very often which many of the great comics didn't. What is there about you, you think, which makes people laugh?

Hancock:

Well, it's difficult to say. I don't think I can be really objective about that...erm...I think I know what my own mistakes are as I make them. I don't think I gain anything by seeing myself.

Freeman:

Is it facial expression? Is it good scriptwriters? Is it a, a...a...a sense of timing? Is it a knowledge of what constitutes comedy? What, what is it? You must have some idea.

Hancock:

It's a knowledge of what constitutes living in general I think. As I say you, you take erm...the..erm, weaknesses of your own character and of other peoples' characters and you exploit them. You, you...you show yourself up and you show them up.

Freeman:

Now it's often been said of you, I don't know whether this is true or not, that one thing that you do in your comedy is to ridicule the things that you dislike in life. Is that true?

Hancock:

Er, yes. That also applies to the things that you dislike in yourself.

Freeman:

Alright. Now, what are they?

Hancock:

Oh I think a certain erm...affectation. I mean I..I know for instance I often find in a script...erm...things that I've said in all seriousness which they later write up in detail and absolutely which later turn out to be funny. You know, I've been angry or something like that and I...I look at this and I think, "yes that's very funny", unfortunately. Yet it's something I'd said at the time and been rather pompous about and...erm, they have noticed this and, er...written it down and there it is.

Freeman:

This is an example of you debunking yourself. Now, how much do you try and debunk other people as well?

Hancock:

Oh well you do that...er...shall we say generously...erm...yes you do. You debunk pomposity and erm...affectation.

Freeman:

What are the things, can you tell me that there are particular things in the world that you know you dislike; personal characteristics first of all. Is it pomposity that you're after?

Hancock:

You don't dislike them, you accept them.

Freeman:

But do...do you all...

Hancock:

...I mean, you're tolerant towards them.

Freeman:

...but these are what you'd like to pillary if you could?

Hancock:

Yes. As I say, both in yourself and in, in...in everything that you see.

Freeman:

Pomposity's the first one...anything else? Bad temper? Greed?

Hancock:

All those things yes, I think.

Freeman:

And in the world...apart from people in the world outside, what would you most like to reform about the world if you had the chance?

Hancock:

Erm...I'm not capable of doing that.

Freeman:

Well, don't you have dreams about it?

Hancock:

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no. You just observe and...and, and practice, erm...within the limitations of your own talent what you see around you.

Freeman:

You've never dreamed of playing "Hamlet"?

Hancock:

No, no, no, no, no. I'd hardly...I don't think that's for me really.

Freeman:

Erm...you must have, and indeed I believe you have in fact got, quite a lot of personal opinions all the same. Let's take some; have you got any religious views?

Hancock:

Er, no...I have no religion, no.

Freeman:

That means that you're not interested? Or...

Hancock:

...I'm deeply interested and er...shall we say, I'm trying to find faith but...erm...I've had to er, throw away the initial faith that I was brought up in and therefore am...am, erm...now starting again from scratch.

Freeman:

Well now, what were you brought up in?

Hancock:

Er, Church of England.

Freeman:

I see, and you've thrown that away? Does that mean you don't believe in God any longer or might you er, er...er...adopt some other Christian religion?

Hancock:

I am completely, as I say, erm...this has been eliminated now. Erm...this...I no longer believe in so, therefore, I have to have an open mind and look for something else.

Freeman:

Can you recall any moment in your life that your religion failed you?

Hancock:

I think...no, not...it was a thing, I think, that you began...I began to see perhaps when I was 15 or 16. I think I was fairly, deeply Christian before that and, erm...it just failed. Didn't...was no longer believable.

Freeman:

Do you find yourself answerable in your moral judgements to anybody except yourself?

Hancock:

No. I think actually it's just as strong...it's, it, it...erm...you are more moral. Because, it is true to say of morals that surely it, it is without reward. I must be purely and simply moral and for no reason.

Freeman:

Yes, but now...you must have some standards of judgement. Do you, do you, do you judge by anything except your own b...built-in conscience?

Hancock:

No I...your own built-in, your own experience I suppose.

Freeman:

Yes. What about politics? Any political beliefs?

Hancock:

Er...then again, unformed I would say at the moment. Erm...no, not really. Not, not, not to a sort of a...any sort of particular affiliation.

Freeman:

Are you er...are you interested in the sort of lives that ordinary people have? Do you try and...

Hancock:

...indeed. I think any, any actor...that raw material. That's where you draw from. That is the whole of it.

Freeman:

Do you find that as great success has come to you, you've become separated from ordinary people?

Hancock:

No, no, no...even more, erm...I'm completely er...in love with my own profession if you can call it that. And...erm, and the people...people are, are, are, as I say... the people that you observe they erm...you find them more tolerant...more tolerance towards them and erm...they are what you...what you, what you get your...inspiration's too big a word but...but what you get your, your...let's say, your work from.

Freeman:

Most actors you know, I think, are in love with their own profession but you now have reached a level...it's said of you and I suppose it's true that you earn something like £35,000 a year.

Hancock:

I don't.

Freeman:

Well you can deny that if you like but I bet you earn not far short of that.

Hancock:

Well I don't actually because I don't work very much. I work erm, for...er...short times very hard and then I don't work at all because I need to think. And I'm also trying to educate myself so I spend er...I don't make a lot of money - or not all that...yes...not all that much money because I...I take a long time off to think and prepare for what I want to do in the future you see.

Freeman:

Well, I don't want to stay on this too long but while we are on it, do you, do you deny the story which has often been published which I don't think you've denied before...

Hancock:

...what's this then?

Freeman:

...that you're getting about £30,000 a year from the BBC?

Hancock:

Erm...(big pause)...yes. I deny it. (laughs)

Freeman:

Alright, well we'll leave...

Hancock:

...just about! (laughing)

Freeman:

Just about?

Hancock:

Yes. (laughs)

Freeman:

Alright, well we'll leave it at that. Now tell me then, then a bit. You say that you still have contacts with ordinary people and I want to ask you a bit how you do live. Do you live for instance...town or country?

Hancock:

In country, in the country. I have a, a, a house in the country.

Freeman:

And er...er some kind of flat in London or not?

Hancock:

Er, I'd...I usually take a flat for the time that the series is on because of travel and that sort of thing and, and when the pressure is on I find that I need to.

Freeman:

But your normal home is in England in the country?

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

Now, you do go abroad a lot don't you?

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

Why?

Hancock:

Well I find that er...shall we say that the, the only use I have for money really is to erm, er...erm, travel. And to have the luxury of independence...to choose what work I do. Erm...and to read and to learn and therefore to put back into my own...er...profession...a little more, shall we say, I mean...the two things go together. You must...the more you see, the more you read, the more you learn, the more you have to offer.

Freeman:

Well let's talk for a moment about travel. What sort of travel? Do you travel rough? In unexplored countries or...

Hancock:

...yes. Oh, no, not...no not so much that erm...I love France...

Freeman:

...yes.

Hancock:

I go...erm, I find that very relaxing and erm...I...relax there...m...better than anywhere I think.

Freeman:

Why?

Hancock:

Well er...(sigh and a wry grin)...partly because of the licensing laws I think. But, a half way really, which means you can, shall we say, go to Paris, people say, "You go to Paris? Why do you go to Paris? To rest?". Well I do rest there because you can go to sleep, sleep six hours in the afternoon, you can get up and go out all night if you want to.

Freeman:

And of course you're not known.

Hancock:

No, not at all.

Freeman:

Have you ever, in fact, performed in Paris?

Hancock:

Never.

Freeman:

No? Would you like to?

Hancock:

Very much.

Freeman:

How good is your French?

Hancock:

Pretty bad.

Freeman:

Could you do a show in French?

Hancock:

Er, no, not really...er, one could do...er, sort of a s...you know the Lideaux things you know where you talk half in French in little bits and pieces and erm...er, but not truly no. But I've had to learn French enough to be able to do that.

Freeman:

Well let's go on about your life. What sort of relaxations and hobbies? Now, for instance you said, spoke a moment ago about reading.

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

Do you read a lot?

Hancock:

Er, yes I do now.

Freeman:

What sort of stuff?

Hancock:

I read history, philosophy and, and all the things that come off it naturally.

Freeman:

Now, I wonder, is this a recognition that perhaps earlier in your life you didn't do all this reading? Are you trying to catch up?

Hancock:

Oh yes indeed. I, I...b...it seemed as if you...for the first thirty years my eyes were closed and then I...I became interested and I've er...found a real thirst for knowledge and erm...now, fortunately I have the opportunity to...er...put, put right this lack of education.

Freeman:

Can you give me a, er...is there any memory in your mind of a turning point about this? Do you remember something which happened which suddenly opened your eyes? (pause) Or a person you...

Hancock:

...I think...it's a very simple example I suppose I...I...for some...I, I read the Wells' "Outline of History". Very simple maybe but erm...it er, put the thing into perspective...er...it put you into an entirely different position if you understand...viewing your own sort of ego and personality in terms of this vast time and that's really started me reading many other things.

Freeman:

And you've gone much more deeply into it since then. Is Wells still a hero?

Hancock:

Oh indeed. I think it was a tremendous attempt to cover such an enormous thing in one...volume which he managed to do very well.

Freeman:

Yes. Do you read the psychologists at all?

Hancock:

Yes I do but very er...only really sort of outlines because I need to read er, introductions. No, I can't start like that.

Freeman:

But this is a real notion in your life that you'd like to read more and you'd like to go further into these things?

Hancock:

Oh I must. Er, er...as I say, I'm entirely interested in, in erm...comedy. This, this is so much part of it...er...and, erm...I, it is, it is the sort of raw material that it, again, it is absolutely necessary.

Freeman:

Now, turning to the lighter side of reading, er, just tell me by name what daily newspapers do you read?

Hancock:

Er, practically all I'd say. Erm, I think that's absolutely necessary...yes...as I also think it's necessary to watch nearly all, nearly all television for instance...

Freeman:

...Good Lord!

Hancock:

...I mean it...yes I know! It's hard to bare isn't it (laughs). No, I think it is because you, you...otherwise er...shall we say, if you need to, if you want to see something that needs XXXXXXXXXX or if you want to see something you want to have a go at maybe, then you have to see it all.

Freeman:

Do you read the criticism about yourself?

Hancock:

Erm, reluctantly, yes.

Freeman:

Do they hurt?

Hancock:

Erm...yes they do actually. I try to eliminate that but it's not possible.

Freeman:

Do you find that the newspaper criticis, critics are to be taken seriously? Do you really think about the points they make?

Hancock:

Well as a matter of fact I think about the point that anybody makes. I mean it would be nice to say you were...beyond that maybe but you never are.

Freeman:

You've got an awful lot of money now and we won't argue about how much (Hancock laughs), what do you spend it on? Motor cars?

Hancock:

Erm, er...yes. Up to a point. My wife actually drives, she is the enthusiastic driver. I gave it up some time ago.

Freeman:

Why?

Hancock:

I wasn't any good at it.

Freeman:

Did y...was that proved to you by...physically, or, or...?

Hancock:

It was proved to...physically yes.

Freeman:

In...in circumstances which brought you to court or not?

Hancock:

Er, no actually. It was erm...there was er...an accident. And that was the end. But actually I never had any idea of it really.

Freeman:

Do you spend money er, I know it's difficult to answer this question but try, do you spend money extravagantly or not?

Hancock:

Erm...it depen...I suppose so, sometimes yes. Erm...it depends. It depends what sort of relaxation you need to find but always it's with an end in view.

Freeman:

What, er...what are your extravagances?

Hancock:

Well I like staying in big hotels, in a suite occasionally for a couple of days, that sort of thing. Or, or to travel or, or...erm, to travel in considerable luxury maybe. That's about all.

Freeman:

Do you have, for instance, you live in the country. Where? Whereabouts in the country now?

Hancock:

Lingfield.

Freeman:

Lingfield. Do you have a lot of friends in that neighbourhood?

Hancock:

Erm...not really. We haven't been there very long but er, we bring friends down to the house (Hancock lights a cigarette)...one of the...most interesting things, the best things about...the house is a valuable thing to me because it means that we can talk down there. I can have people down there and I find the biggest relaxation I can have here is, is to talk...er, with people that I like, people, probably about this business maybe, maybe all the things that come off it and erm...we talk and talk y'know...long into the, into the...the...into the morning and...it's a relaxation. Also ideas spring from that.

Freeman:

Are these showbiz friends or friends who've been with you all your life?

Hancock:

Well, yes they are to a certain extent. You can say that they're show business people but most show business people I know are not sheerly interested in that. They are particularly interested in, well everyone...there are so many things that come off it...erm, perhaps we talk about the, the show for about 10% of the time.

Freeman:

Yes, now, very intimately you say talking far into the night. Do you as a matter of fact sleep well when you go to bed?

Hancock:

No.

Freeman:

Do you take sleeping pills?

Hancock:

Hmmm (Hancock mumbles in acknowledgement as he takes a drag of his cigarette)

Freeman:

Why don't you sleep do you think?

Hancock:

Well I think that you...er...in these days of er, the challenge of this particular medium anyway, erm...your mind works high, quick...you are permanently on an edge, a good one I think and therefore it is very difficult to relax while a thing is on, while a show is on. But er, no...generally not particularly well.

Freeman:

It's said about you that you worry a lot about your weight. Is that true?

Hancock:

Hmmm (agrees) I don't suppose no, I've got it more or less sorted out now erm...well, within reason. I, if I can...you know, I was about two and a half stone heavier than this at one time.

Freeman:

Do you follow strict diets and all the rest of it to keep your weight down?

Hancock:

Erm, shall we say, for a time I do and then I, I er...after a show is over, after, after a series is over for instance I do anything, whatever I want and then I pull right down.

Freeman:

Why do you worry so much? A, a funny man can be fat perfectly well without...

Hancock:

...I think it makes you sluggish generally. Your mind is sluggish and er, I think it's a bad thing really.

Freeman:

You haven't got any children have you?

Hancock:

No.

Freeman:

Would you like to have?

Hancock:

No.

Freeman:

Why not I wonder?

Hancock:

I don't know. I think that...I don't know really.

Freeman:

Do you, do you have anything against children, "Flippin' kids"? (a reference to Hancock's character's catchphrase in the radio series "Educating Archie")

Hancock:

No (laughs) nothing at all, no, no, no.

Freeman:

"Flippin' kids" doesn't represent any, any er, antipathy to...

Hancock:

...no, no, none at all, none at all, no. I love other peoples' children.

Freeman:

Did you have a...on the whole a happy childhood yourself? Do you look back on it with pleasure?

Hancock:

Erm, I think perhaps the early part, yes.

Freeman:

Your father, one reads about you, was a pub keeper. Now, I don't know what that means. Was it a little working-class pub or was it a posh hotel or what?

Hancock:

Well actually he w...he was erm, he was rather like me in a way. There were a lot of, he had a lot of moods he did all sorts of things. He was a laundry owner, a pub keeper, a hotel keeper, a boxing referee...all sorts of...also a semi-pro comedian.

Freeman:

But pretty well-off I should think from what you've just said?

Hancock:

Oh, no he fluctuated a great deal.

Freeman:

Ah, you w...I see. Do you reckon that you, you were in Birmingham this...when you were...

Hancock:

...no, no, they left Birmingham I...for...they left when I was 3 years old we left Birmingham for h...for his health he went to live in Bournemouth.

Freeman:

In Bournemouth.

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

Now, were you, you...sort of, would you say you were middle-class or working-class?

Hancock:

I'd say (slightly embarrassed laugh) sort of lower-middle I should think.

Freeman:

Lower-middle, yes...did you remember that with pleasure? Did you like the life in a hotel for instance?

Hancock:

Er no, it was a bit impersonal really. They were much too busy to really spend a great deal of time with us...and actually anyway he died when I was about eleven years old so I didn't see all that much of him.

Freeman:

No. You say "with us", you're not an only child?

Hancock:

No, no, no, there were three, there are, there...my elder brother was killed during the war, I have another brother, younger brother.

Freeman:

Yes. You, you, you er...were given, mmm, slightly unexpected names, Anthony Aloysius St John (Hancock laughs). Any special family reasons for that?

Hancock:

Well they're not true. Those are created by the scriptwriters.

Freeman:

Those are entirely created?

Hancock:

Entirely.

Freeman:

What is your real name then?

Hancock:

Anthony John Hancock.

Freeman:

Anthony John Hancock? (Freeman laughs, obviously embarrassed at his blunder) Did you, in er...extreme childhood, think well of yourself? Were you sort of independent and brash or were you an introverted little boy?

Hancock:

No, I was pretty much of an extrovert 'til about the age of about fourteen I think and then...sort of packed up.

Freeman:

Why?

Hancock:

I've no idea.

Freeman:

What clear memories do you have of your mother?

Hancock:

Oh well I'm...

Freeman:

...at that age. I know she's still alive but in your childhood?

Hancock:

Oh, one of deep affection. Do you mean, er...what?

Freeman:

Yes, er...I wonder if you've got any early and vivid memory that's stuck in your mind through the years.

Hancock:

Not really. The most...the memory I have best of her really is the encouragement she gave me to do what I wanted to do, though I showed no sign at all of being able to do it initially.

Freeman:

And yet this was really following your father?

Hancock:

Yes I think er, er in many ways it was a deep thing with me to, to try and justify it 'cause I believe he was, he was pretty good.

Freeman:

Yes, erm...you went to a public school. Now, was this a natural thing to do? Were you among people of your own sort of type and class there, or were you slightly...?

Hancock:

...I would say not...

Freeman:

...no.

Hancock:

They considered it was a, that they would, they would try to give me the best education that they possibly could which I think was a fine thing for them to do because neither of them had an education really you know. And, erm...I didn't want it, I felt it was making the thing too much in a mould erm...it was pushing me into...

Freeman:

...now wait a minute, now wait a minute, at the age of fourteen you can't have thought it was making you too much in a mould.

Hancock:

Yes I did! Most defi...most definitely. And I left there, I left there myself and it was one of the best decisions I made I think.

Freeman:

I was going to ask you, you left at sixteen didn't you?

Hancock:

Fifteen.

Freeman:

Fifteen? Well now, what did you...you didn't do very much immediately you left did you?

Hancock:

(Laughs) No.

Freeman:

Well why did you leave then exactly?

Hancock:

Erm, I wanted to get into the theatre. As I say, I'd shown no particular sign of ability at that time but I felt that I, I could do it sometime, I don't know why really...and erm, well it more or less...I went to a technical college and learnt shorthand typing, did a few sort of odd jobs for a short time and then erm, when the war started I went into erm...troop entertainment.

Freeman:

You in fact went into the RAF presumably as an ordinary irk and then drifted into entertainment. Is that, is that correct?

Hancock:

No I was doing it before.

Freeman:

Ah yes.

Hancock:

Yes. When I was sixteen or seventeen.

Freeman:

But your first professional experience was with...what? ENSA or...?

Hancock:

First professional experience wasn't really 'til after the war. 1947.

Freeman:

But you had a good deal of experience of entertaining on a large scale, even if not professionally, while you were in the RAF.

Hancock:

Oh yes because I went into the Gang Show, with the Ralph Reader's Gang Show.

Freeman:

Ah yes.

Hancock:

And it was a great experience for all of us really because we played in all sorts of circumstances; on ships, in caves, you know, on backs of lorries and everything and we did a lot of things that we weren't able to do. I mean there are only eleven men in the company and everybody had to do things...erm, you made about fourteen appearances in the show you see. And although you did a lot of things that you weren't really suited to do, it, it somehow opened it up a little more and you saw possibilities of, of expanding in a way that you hadn't thought of before.

Freeman:

Now, when you were demobbed, did you go pretty well quickly into professional showbiz?

Hancock:

Er, no...not really. There were quite long periods of nothing and er...

Freeman:

...well what happened? Tell us what "nothing" means.

Hancock:

Er, well, er...I came out of the Air Force in November 1946 and there was the gratuity of course... that lasted for about three weeks! Then there was, sort of, certain loans and bits and pieces and I got a first job, it was about erm, I think, about May 1947.

Freeman:

And what was that job?

Hancock:

That was in a thing called "Wings", that was the first professional show that I did; that was, again, with Ralph Reader. Well it didn't...it lasted f...er, it was on tour for er, several weeks but erm, then again there was another nasty gap and erm...I was living erm, in a room in Baron's Court, and eating a particularly horrible brand of sausage which at least was filling and sort of kept me going and that sort of thing but...no...there was quite a long time before it began to take any shape or, that you could say you were earning a living at it.

Freeman:

Well now, when did you earn a living?

Hancock:

Er, I should say from about 1948 onwards.

Freeman:

And how did it start?

Hancock:

At the Windmill really.

Freeman:

At the Windmill in London?

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

A rather 'specialised' form of entertainment! You didn't strip presumably did you?

Hancock:

(Laughing) No. Oh no, no. Fortunately not. No, it was...it's er...marvellous place really to erm, run-in an act. We did six shows a day for six days a week and erm, you learnt how to die like a swan, you know, gracefully. I mean, I used to go on...the show used to start at 12.15, I used to go on at 12.19 to three rows of gentlemen reading newspapers and...nothing, you see, absolutely nothing! But you learnt to die with a smile on your face, you see...and walk off. And you came back again at 2 'o' clock to the same people! And you died again you see but it was a very great experience... I didn't enjoy at the time but it's been a great benefit afterwards.

Freeman:

Did you ever succeed in making them put their newspapers down before you finished?

Hancock:

No, but I'll tell you what were the best thing were the drunks used to come in about twenty past three when the pubs were closed and they were quite lively, you know, it sort of made the day go.

Freeman:

And then after the Windmill, the radio came?

Hancock:

Yes.

Freeman:

And you pretty rapidly became a national figure?

Hancock:

Erm, no. Then again there were quite...between this a lot of Summers Seasons and things which were valuable experience to me during this time and er, only a few broadcasts.

Freeman:

I notice looking through what's been publicised about your career that i...there's a bit of obscurity about this but it seems as if three times in recent years you've had some sort of a, a breakdown in health (Freeman seems to be carefully picking his way around inference to a nervous breakdown and the state of Hancock's mental health). Er, is this true? Is your health a bit ropery?

Hancock:

Oh no, I don't think so, er...this is mainly erm...from the Adelphi, this stems from one occasion at the Adelphi. I was there for erm, I went in as a replacement and I went in too quickly and the act that I had wasn't particularly good and we were doing it twice a night and the show ran for two years and it, the act was a little...dodgy shall we say and if I didn't work absolutely at a pitch every performance it didn't go very well so I had to force myself into this position and eventually it did wear, it just sort of wore me out and, and I went off for a month that's all.

Freeman:

You never had any experience of this kind at the Windmill? It was the particular circumstances of this show with you?

Hancock:

The Windmill was too quick, you know? You were sort of on and off and on and off it, it was different. And it didn't, it wasn't the, doing the same thing, you see, over and over again; for two years...is a long time twice a night.

Freeman:

Ah now...you like the change all the time?

Hancock:

I love it, yes.

Freeman:

This is perhaps why you've specialised in radio and television?

Hancock:

It is entirely because, er...now I think if...I would, I would hate to do a show like that any more. I like the, the challenge of new material every week.

Freeman:

Tes. Now, er, did you in fact have a, a health breakdown earlier, when, last year, last autumn or not?

Hancock:

That was purely and simply, there is a thing that sometimes happens in this business, erm...I have a lot of dialogue to learn every, every week and sometimes if you get into the sort of vicious circle of getting too tired to learn...and then, erm...not sleeping because you're worried that you're not learning you go, you know, you eventually come down to this...and I had a week off and a, a sort of sleep and it was alright again.

Freeman:

Erm, it's often said of you, and I think my own observations for what they're worth bear this out, that you don't find it very easy to incorporate women in your act. there have been some exceptions, Hatty Jacques for instance, but on the whole...

Hancock:

...yes.

Freeman:

...you, you have had difficulty. Now, why? Is this something to do with your own brand of comedy?

Hancock:

No, I don't think so. I think that you can only, erm...Hatty is fine because she is erm, plays a sort of a comic, comic character anyway. But a sort of straight love interest with the character I play is virtually impossible.

Freeman:

Why?

Hancock:

Well it's (laughs) it's me! You know. I mean you can't really get romantic about the sort of gentleman in the Homburg hat and the, the fur collar surely? It just...doesn't apply.

Freeman:

Are you absolutely stuck to this character now? Do you see it modifying and developing at all?

Hancock:

Oh yes I think so, definitely. I, erm...there are certain things I'd like to get away from now really, they're difficult to talk about really but...gradually you do pull away from erm, you try and throw away the rubbish (Sid James?), I mean it accumulates all the time and you try and throw it over, throw it away and you come down to what is really your own...personality. In other words you spend most of the time discarding, not gathering.

Freeman:

And this is a job that you've not finished doing yet?

Hancock:

Oh, by no means.

Freeman:

Erm, facing a...individual erm, performance, do you actually enjoy it or is it hell while you're doing it?

Hancock:

No, it's a bit of hell just before it starts and there's a lot of, you know, champing around trying to get...an edge..a right edge so that you are relaxed but also have a, a kick so that you are going to be alive and, and erm...also relaxed. It needs a great deal of concentration and hold upon yourself to do this. Erm, sometimes er...it's a little too quick to really enjoy I think but, erm (pause) but there you are it's, it's very challenging and it's, it is enjoyable as a whole, but erm...there's too much, er, immediate concentration to really, you can't really completely say, "Oh well we can have a bit of a ball", you know.

Freeman:

Looking back on your first thirty five years, jolly straight question, are you happy or not?

Hancock:

Erm...I've been very fortunate I think. I, I have everything that er, er could erm...that anybody could want to make them happy but...

Freeman:

...I, I (interrupts with the intention of asking something to the effect, "You may have material success but are you actually happy in yourself?", but Hancock re-interrupts)

Hancock:

(a little irritated and knowing the gist of what Freeman was about to ask him)...wait a minute I haven't finished yet. I was going to say that erm, it...the, the, the only happiness you c...I could achieve would be to perfect the talent that I have whatever it may be, however small it may be. that is the whole purpose of it and that is the whole purpose of, of, of what I do.

Freeman:

Er, some of the newspaper writers who've tried to puzzle out what makes you tick have dec...have said that you're the 'Angst Man', the, the, the anxiety man. Now, have you any notion of what your anxiety is? Do you in fact get a kick out of your anxiety?

Hancock:

(pause)...anxiet...I don't think I c...anxiety? Can you explain that a bit more?

Freeman:

Well, something appears to be, even at the end of this conversation, to be eating you. You say that your happiness is just ahead of you still...

Hancock:

...well I...

Freeman:

...there's something troubling you about the world. I'd like to know what it is.

Hancock:

I wouldn't expect happiness. I don't, I don't think that's possible (pause) but erm, I'm very fortunate to be able to do work in something that I like. I think to, to have a...er, to work in something that is, that is pleasure...is, is all anybody can ask.

Freeman:

Erm, you wouldn't then change your way of life at all?

Hancock:

I'd try and improve it, yes.

Freeman:

Well...improve it but, you'd go on in the same way getting better at what you're doing?

Hancock:

Yes. And if such a time came that I found that I'd come to the end of what I could develop out of my own ability, limited however it may be, then I would, wouldn't want to do it any more.

Freeman:

Tony Hancock, I wonder if you really get very much out of your triumphs. You've got cars that you don't drive (Hancock laughs), er, you've got health which you tell me is a bit ropey because you find...

Hancock:

...I didn't tell you that.

Freeman:

...well you, you find it so difficult to learn your lines. You've got money that you can't really spend, you worry about your weight...

Hancock:

(nervously lights a cigarette)...I spend the money. I do, I, I enjoy it.

Freeman:

Well, what I want to put to you as a, as a final question is this; you could stop all this tomorrow if you wanted to. You're rich enough to coast along for the rest of your days, now why...

Hancock:

...money, money is of no account in this.

Freeman:

Well, tell me why you go on?

Hancock:

Well because...hmm? (Hancock wants Freeman to repeat his last question)

Freeman:

Tell me why you go on, as a last answer.

Hancock:

Because it absolutely fascinates me, because I love it and because it is my entire life.