

# arts



## East Cheam, twinned with Little Britain

**The writers of Little Britain meet their idols, Galton and Simpson, creators of Hancock's Half Hour. Laura Silverman joins the love-in**

**O**n the surface their writing couldn't be more different. The creators of *Little Britain*, Matt Lucas and David Walliams, go for caricatures (Vicky Pollard; Daffyd, the only gay in a Welsh village); Tony Hancock's writers Ray Galton and Alan Simpson go for naturalistic dialogue and bleakness: in *Hancock's Half Hour* the protagonist was a miserable everyman from the suburb of East Cheam. But as fans, Lucas and Walliams are verging on sycophantic. "We have the same tastes! We watch the same things!" cries Lucas to Simpson when I meet them at Soho

House. On the other side of the coffee table are Walliams, Lucas's writing partner, and Galton, Simpson's former writing buddy. The comedy veterans are taking the praise graciously: it seems to be admiration all round.

We're here to discuss a new book of ten lost Hancock scripts, written by Galton and Simpson and introduced by devotees Walliams and Lucas. As a child, Walliams saw Hancock recordings as an escape from depression: he used to lock himself in the bathroom and "repeat them and rehearse them". Lucas remembers Sunday evenings as a kid in the mid-Eighties with his family gathered round the TV in hysterics over Hancock repeats. "Lost" is a romantic

euphemism for wiped by the BBC back in the Fifties and Sixties to cut costs. The book contains a tiny proportion of the 101 radio shows, 63 television programmes and one film that the pair wrote for Hancock between 1952 and 1961; they worked on everything he did during those nine years.

Galton and Simpson met 62 years ago at Milford TB sanatorium in Kent in their late teens. Galton had been given six weeks to live; Simpson had been given the last rites. "We've been given the last rites, but only professionally," Lucas says. They were soon broadcasting their own radio show, making fun of the sanatorium. They agreed to do six sketch programmes, dried up after four and "thought it was all over and done with, an interesting little career".

When they got out, they wrote to the BBC for work. The comedian Derek Roy saw one of their scripts and asked them to write one-liners for him. This led to a writing job on the show *Happy Go Lucky*. "We had no idea what we

**Funny faces: from left, Alan Simpson, David Walliams, Matt Lucas and Ray Galton**

**“ Hancock could read a script from fresh and get every line correct**

were doing," Simpson says, but Hancock, one of the stars, thought they did. They were watching a rehearsal one day when, Galton says, "he looked across to us and said: 'Did you write that?' We thought: 'God, did he like it?' And we said: 'Yes.' He said: 'Very funny,' and walked off."

Hancock asked them to write short stand-up routines for him. Galton and Simpson maintain they always got on with the manic depressive, alcoholic comedian. Hancock would leave them to it. "He could read a script from fresh the first time he'd seen it and get every line correct, every intonation," Simpson says. *Hancock's Half Hour* was the first show to replace the sketch-based tradition of the music hall with character and situation-based humour. "Hancock wasn't a gag man," Galton says. "He was more of an actor than a comedian, so we had to work that way."

Both say they have always known when an idea will work by imitating the performers' voices when they were trying out material. "We wouldn't put ▶