

SUBURB JOKER

featuring Ian Davidson

Anthea and Ian drove through the Suburb by chance in 1970. They were delighted with what they saw – especially as they had a bit of a problem...

It was time to give up Anthea’s amazing studio in NW6 – a medieval great hall with minstrels’ gallery. What could possibly compete with that? The Suburb could. They even thought it was reasonably priced. That was in 1971 – so, as Ian says, “We were the last who ever had that thought. Our daughters Clemency, Grace and Hannah all regard themselves as Suburbites but will they ever live here again? We doubt it.”

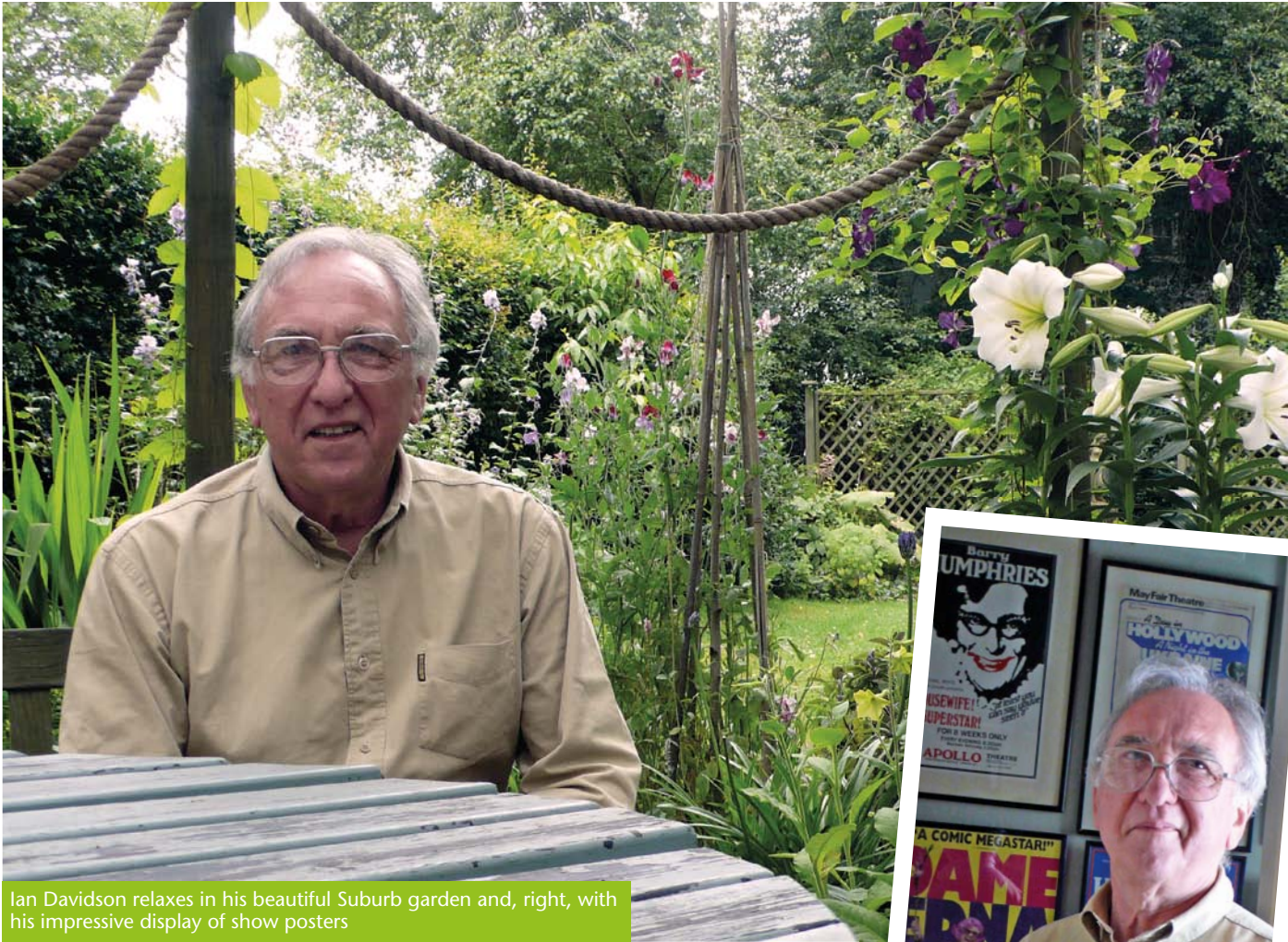
All they knew then about Hampstead Garden Suburb was that it was a bit of a mouthful and that Harold Wilson had just moved out. But there was something eerily familiar about it all to Ian. “It was a long time before the penny dropped that I had walked to school every day through Romford Garden Suburb (Yes! Look it up) which has a similar range of vernacular-inspired cottages through to larger houses with the same grey brick with red window surrounds as here.”

Over the years Ian has called himself ‘an actor, writer, editor, director and producer. It’s whatever came to hand, but mostly in television’. It all started when he was at Oxford and ‘mucked around at the smart Alec end of comedy’ with the likes of the future Pythons, Michael Palin and Terry Jones. They were in plays and revues and went on to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe. Obsessive fans of Python will know that it’s Ian who took the part of the Dead Indian on a Pile of Dung and of the Irritating Man who pops up constantly in Python’s *Election Night* saying, “Can I just say this is my first time on television?”

After graduating Ian got a job at Granada Television and his first credit as a scriptwriter was with Michael Frayn and John Bird. He laughingly adds, “It was downhill from there!” As a freelancer he was also writing for the groundbreaking satirical TV programme *That Was The Week That Was*.

In 1967 Ian started working with Barry Humphries and his alter ego Dame Edna Everage and this working relationship lasted until recently. Ian describes Humphries as a ‘theatrical genius’. He went on to say, “My near high point was having two shows I had directed in the West End on at the same time. *A Day in Hollywood*, *a Night in the Ukraine* was on at the Mayfair and Barry Humphries invites you to *A Night on Mount Edna*’ was on at the Piccadilly. I could run from one to the other and see the curtains go up. Waiting for the New York Times review for Dame Edna in Sardi’s was best of all perhaps. It was a rave.”

Ian went on to say, “A low point would be standing in a snowdrift holding up a card with the words for Andy Williams to sing *Moon River* – he never could remember them.” This was when he was a script editor at the BBC and no one else was available. Another time Ian was working on the TV interviews conducted by Dame Edna and had to try and stop Rudolph Nureyev from leaving the studio when someone had offended him – he did however think Nureyev was ‘pretty bonkers’ by then.



Ian Davidson relaxes in his beautiful Suburb garden and, right, with his impressive display of show posters

Ian still works and counts himself lucky to be doing so. Peter Vincent and he wrote a Radio 4 sitcom for Ronnie Corbett called *When the Dog Dies*. Ian explains why the series has this title: “If it rings a vague bell it’s because people have probably outlined their plans to you and said they’re planning to grow old disgracefully, become grey nomads, spend the children’s inheritance – when the dog/cat/aged P dies. The show is all about being a grandfather – necessarily perhaps. Peter is one, I’m one and Ronnie C is one – although he persists in calling us ‘the boys’. We don’t know if Radio 4 will want another series, so if you happen to hear it and enjoy it, do ring up the BBC and tell them so.

Other than that, Peter and I get roped in as pundits on tributes to Ronnie Barker, Les Dawson, Frankie Howerd, Dave Allen – all of whom have used our words.” On the Suburb Ian has fetched and carried at the Proms for many years, he helps put up the Christmas tree in St Jude’s every year and last year he won a certificate from the Allotments Committee! He is a fan of the Historical Association and

encourages us to ‘look at our winter schedule’ all of which, of course, is raw material for the Corbett script – but only if Peter Vincent and Anthea think it’s funny. Although Ian was too modest to mention it, he also wrote the script for the excellent *Centenary Pageant* in 2007 which was performed in Little Wood by the Garden Suburb Theatre.

His favourite place on the Suburb is Farm Walk where he and Anthea live. “I see most of my friends on their way to the shops or to the Health Centre. So far I’ve managed to remember their names. But soon I may have to duck behind a wheelie bin when my mind goes blank.” Somehow I think that is a good way off. **S**



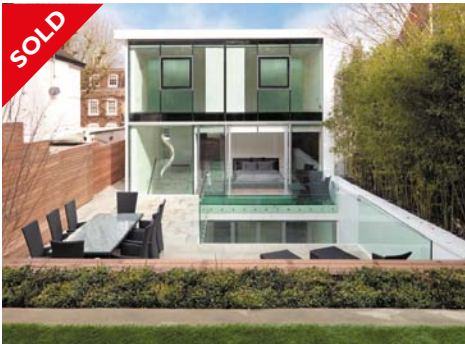
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