



**“Looking back, I don’t know how I had the audacity to do stand-up, but I did. That must have been quite a leap for me – like being a gardener and becoming prime minister”**

# More than fabulous

Helen Lederer still gets stopped by Ab Fab fans who loved her as Catriona, but these days she’s busy writing, performing and entertaining. **Cathy Levy** meets her at her East Dulwich home

**H**elen Lederer’s kitchen is looking positively calm. A radical change from the state it was in, not being rude, a short while ago – on my television screen that is. The comedy actress was appearing on Channel 4’s *Come Dine With Me*, where fellow celebrities have to prepare a dinner party for each other in their homes and then rate their efforts. She admits it all went horribly wrong.

“That was hilarious because I came second from bottom. I like to think I can cook but obviously when you’re up against other people and cameras, it’s very pressured. I went slightly hysterical – that’s often my way of coping – but when you forget to put poppy seeds in the poppy seed cheesecake, the blender didn’t work and things genuinely went wrong... I really wasn’t trying to do a Morecambe and Wise sketch,” she says, now relaxed on her sofa, a cup of ginger and lemon tea in hand, at home in East Dulwich.

But she’s a very good cook, proven when she appeared on another cookery show, *Celebrity MasterChef*, and almost won her round. “Lots of people wrote to me saying I was robbed and I was quite cheered by that. It was fun to do and Roland [Rivron] and I, and the sweet weatherman [Ian McCaskill] had a laugh, but I did think my dish was better than Roland’s, but then you feel such a Minnie-Moaner saying that.”

Of course, it’s a slight detour from the stand-up comedy days and being in *Naked Video* with Gregor Fisher in the 80s, or appearing in *The Young*

*Ones, Bottom, The Baldy Man* and playing Catriona in *Absolutely Fabulous*. Then again, maybe not. Over the years, Helen has become a firm part of that multi-skilled sect of performer/writers who ‘can-do-all’, including cooking and being funny with it. These days she’s an author (a comedy novel is being scribed as we speak), she appears on television both as herself and as an actress (she’s in the forthcoming second series of *Love Soup* with Tamsin Greig), reads the boards, gives after-dinner speeches, is a wine columnist (she’s taken all the exams) and a writer extraordinaire for various magazines and newspapers.

Most recently she’s just finished a play over at Hampstead’s New End Theatre, *Wake Up And Smell The Coffee*. It was her first for three years and she received good reviews. “For me that was important, I needed to dust off some cobwebs and I did. I’d even do another play now.” Which is good to hear, considering she brought such vitality and sparkle to the stage – albeit a very small space indeed. “Yes, I’m not one who particularly likes to see the whites of people’s eyes but I think it really was a turning point for me.”

It takes a good measure of guts to dust off those cobwebs and jump back out there. Helen clearly has plenty of guts, despite admitting she’s often beset by deep insecurity. “Looking back, I don’t know how I had the audacity to do stand-up, but I did. That must have been quite a leap for me – like being a gardener and becoming prime minister,” she says mockingly. “I knew it was what I always wanted to do, I’ve just always had to battle, as a lot of

people do, with self-belief, but then that feeds into what I write about and do.”

She’s carved a firm niche for herself doing a mixture of everything she enjoys most, and is well liked, largely because of that self-deprecating, clever, insightful humour – and well, she just has a funny way. Helen says if she had to pluck names out of a hat to work with she’d choose, “David Frost – I always liked *That Was The Week That Was*. I like people who have a combination of humour and other aspects to them, and I quite like watching the two Johns [Bird and Fortune]. But maybe Madonna, I don’t know.”

Her life’s had its wobbly moments too. After a short marriage to Roger Alton, now editor of *The Observer*, Helen lived the single life for many years while bringing up their daughter Hannah, 17. “Things happened as they did. I got married very briefly and I had Hannah, and once that happened, for me personally my choices changed about what I thought I could do. I’m so thrilled I had Hannah, and overall it’s not gone too badly. I’m much more relaxed than I ever have been,” she says sincerely.

It’s a good time for her now. Married for seven years to GP Chris Brown, and all living together in a lovely, homely, sprawling house, Helen says she loves meeting friends on Lordship Lane. “Someone called it ‘The Lane’ the other day. I really love that. Black Cherry is good, and the Mind charity shop is brilliant at the bottom. Also Therapy, it’s very peaceful. I just got my toenails done there actually.”

She really does seem at ease with life. “I’m 50-plus and it’s only just now you can go, ‘well I am’ – so there have to be parts for that. That’s why I like to do my wine and writing so I can do lots of things and not be precious. Sometimes you become so side-tracked by wanting something so badly that unless you get it you become very unhappy. I think you have to say, if you don’t get it you can do something else. I’m much more positive now.” Now that’s contentment. ■

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