

CROSSING THE PICKET LINE

Interview with Finetime Fontayne

Earlier this year, during the miners' strike, Finetime Fontayne played the part of Henry Wakefield, an unemployed scab, in *Coronation Street*. The arrival of Henry Wakefield affected the entire street bringing the issue of strike action and picketing to the forefront of the series. It was difficult not to make some connection with the miners' strike. As Finetime Fontayne found out, playing Henry Wakefield affected real life too.

In *Coronation Street* Henry Wakefield became Hilda Ogden's lodger and pretended to go to work (at British Rail) each day. The recently-widowed Hilda discovers his secret and finds him a job labouring in the local clothing factory. But the union there gets to know of his scab background and, after an emotional outburst, he leaves the factory and the Street. Here he talks to Rosalind Brunt about his experience acting in *Coronation Street*, and about his previous work in cabaret, community and repertory theatre and with the socialist feminist theatre group Red Ladder.

What was it like working for Red Ladder?

When I went to them I didn't have any political thoughts in my head at all. Certainly, I got to know about feminism through being with them. I didn't like it: I was struggling like a trout because I didn't understand I was doing anything wrong. But it was smashing to be there. Everybody was involved fully in putting on the show, the acting and the organisation. There were daily company meetings. It's quite a longwinded process, that. And it seemed hard. You're wanting everybody to put their oar in about each bit of it. And it took a lot of time.

Could you give me an example of a particular production you were involved in?

The first Red Ladder production I did was *Nerves of Steel*. I played Old George who's been in the socialist movement for quite a while and worked in the steel industry. He

advised the main character, who couldn't cope with the long working hours which were alienating him from his wife. I also played Andy Scrapp, a sexist stand-up comic who did all this dreadful stuff with a female dummy. The women in the show then take over the spot and put matters straight!

And this was when you were still learning about feminism?

Yes. That's happened quite a lot in the things that I've done. Learning while working, and it's been a definite pattern of each show I've done - learning more and more about politics.

You come from a working class background. Have you still kept those connections?

Moving into teacher training began the problem because that was moving me 'up the ladder', away from them, to being 'posh'. But my family encouraged me because it was the sort of mobility that everybody wanted: 'to better yourself. But then I didn't go into teaching. I went into acting - and that seemed a very strange move to make. They couldn't understand me then. I couldn't talk about my work because they'd either take it as 'oh he's showing-off' or 'we don't know what he's talking about'. But I did a play about a club act and encouraged my family





to come. And they loved it. Things changed then: 'We know what it's about. It's funny. He made us laugh that night. He's very successful and he's good at it.' And that sort of helped me back. Getting involved in *Coronation Street* has really solidified that. Now they think I'm successful at what I do.

What was your family's reaction to the Henry Wakefield part?

It wasn't a problem at all. They've been really nothing but supportive. I mean they're really chuffed that someone in the family's on the telly. Which is great. My family's a mining family. My dad was a miner. Most of my cousins are miners. And they were all on strike. I was out with some of my cousins in Barnsley recently. My face was known then and I was quite frightened. However I got a lot of recognition and no aggro at all. I said to them, 'It's a bit odd isn't it?' and they said, 'No, we're just all so proud of you here!' There was a thing in the press about a petition signed by a hundred miners in Goldthorpe, which is very near where I come from, saying 'Get the scab off the telly'. But it was a joke I believe. I don't think anybody was really angry at me personally. I don't know what the decision to put a scab into the storyline was about. All that was done before I got there.

/ was very sorry they did do it because it was hard not to make the connection with the miners' strike. They could've done without the melodrama and just had this story about someone who'd been made redundant, for instance, and didn't want people to know. At the beginning I thought that was how it was going to turn out - Coronation Street taking unemployment seriously at last! When you were offered the part did you know what it was going to be?

Yes I was petrified. I made the connection immediately. As soon as it was said 'you'll be a scab going through picket lines' I worried. I didn't know whether to take it, which is a hell of a thing to say because my average earnings were probably about £4000 a year - and I work a lot. So to me it was a lot of money, a lot of prestige, a lot of work afterwards - and a tremendous opportunity to gain some skills. So to turn down something like 13 episodes of *Coronation Street*. I would've been missing an opportunity to become a television actor.

Having made the decision to play the part, did you think there might be a possibility of arguing about the script?

The only point when I could've argued about the script was at the beginning when they said do you want to do this job. Once I'd said yes, that was it.

Did you have any discussion with the other actors about the part then?

No. I met everybody. I got the first script. I went to wardrobe and we talked about how Henry would look and I asked if I could wear my dad's old anorak because I thought Henry would have a bri-nylon old-fashioned anorak and his suits nearly flared at the bottom. He was just out of time, I thought.

Remind us what actually happened to Henry Wakefield.

Well he crept in. He came into the series very, very slowly. He tells Hilda Ogden that he works for British Rail but really he'd been a scab. He'd worked at a foundry. They were on strike and he'd gone through the picket line so he couldn't get work. He'd been sent to Coventry and it'd upset his mother very badly. She'd been ill; she died.

Didn't he do it for his mother?

Yeh. He argued he did it for his mum because she needed looking after - she needed the money and whatnot. He felt that he'd deceived Hilda and ought to leave. Hilda said 'no no, you must stop, it doesn't matter'. She found him a job in Baldwin's factory but someone sent them a letter to say he'd been a strike-breaker.

Then they had a union meeting at Baldwin's and Henry decided to leave because the atmosphere was bad. He thought he'd been treated badly, got drunk, which is out of character, and told everybody off at a St Valentine's Day dance, and disappeared.

What did you think the programme as a whole was saying about all that - because the characters did take different positions for and against Henry staying?

I think perhaps in the end what came out was that the programme said scabs aren't necessarily all bad. That there are reasons and reasons for the way that people be-

have, the kind of things that they do. That's perhaps what it said in the end. I'm not sure whether that was the intention or not. Perhaps it was anti-trade union. I don't know whether that was intentional. But I think in the end it actually was about how it would be better if firms and managers of firms were allowed to have non-union workforces. Then you would get a higher production, a happier workforce. It would be better for the country in general and it would be a better way for us to organise ourselves. I think that's perhaps what it said.

/ think so. I thought it was also against people who protest about scabbing. For instance, Ida and Vera, who were most opposed to working with Henry, were played more as joke trade union extremists; whereas Ivy and Hilda, who were sorry for Henry, appeared as more sympathetic characters within the programme itself.

I think what I did with the characterisation was dead right. I don't have any sympathy for Henry Wakefield. None at all. But to actually play the character I had to understand him. And the only way I could understand him was if I felt he'd made mistakes. So I could see Henry being unaware, politically unaware as the majority of people are. A 'normal' bloke. When he leaves he's at a point where he's confused. Whether he thinks he's made a mistake or not depends on the fictional scenario of who he meets next to talk to about what occurred.

But all that's in your head?

That's all in my head. But I have to carry that in my head because that's informing how Henry talks, the way he behaves. And it informs the politics in a funny sort of way because it would've been possible to play a very deliberate sort of person who knew exactly what he was doing - and we would've felt maybe even angrier about him - or about Granada Television. I mean, I don't believe that Granada had any intention of being aware. I don't know how it happened.

Yes, it's almost because they're not politically aware, in a way, that this happened.

The writing of *Coronation Street* is done by committee: ten writers or more, two storyline writers and the producer. So our Henry Wakefield scab comes out of collec-

tive discussion. And yet some of the writers I know to be left of centre. But luckily people who watch *Coronation Street* are highly sophisticated. And they're very funny. My cousin was going picketing at a pit he hadn't been to before. And as the bus went in with the working miners, the pickets were shouting 'Henry Wakefield' at the bus: 'Henry Wakefields! Henry bloody Wakefields!' I think that's a hoot. What a way to accommodate something! That's positive. You know, people have been clever.

And turned you into a swear word -

But I think it's smashing.

Where do you plan to go from now? Do you want to build a career, for instance?

Just to put it in context: I'm being put up for work by my agent, but I don't have any work in the future. And that's part of the game.

I mean, 18 million people knew me; and now I'll go and sign on. But yeh I do

want to build a career. It does seem in this business that if you're actually seen, and you seem to be good, seen to be developing, you get work. It's therefore not just a matter of talent. 90% of our industry's out of work at the minute. They're not all rubbish. I can't believe it. At the moment, if you like, I'm flavour of the month, in a small part of the country, in a small area of the industry. And if I don't use that, I'll lose on opportunities to do good work in political theatre and also on opportunities to get to bigger audiences.