

Preface

I do not like surprise parties when I am the one to be surprised, especially when I have been warned in advance. It was October 2013. I had just celebrated my goth birthday with a magnificent party organised by my wife, Annie, and myself at the Churchill Hyatt Hotel, Portman Square, in London's West End. We had invited over 200 guests, family, close friends and many show-business colleagues and acquaintances. It was a huge success and a memorable occasion, with wonderfully witty speeches from my friends Paul Merton and Gyles Brandreth, and a clever musical parody about me from Kit Hesketh-Harvey. My own speech was well received and it was an exceptionally enjoyable, even emotional, evening. Various newspapers and magazines covered the event, and my anxiety that advertising my advanced years would inhibit prospects of future work engagements proved wrong. In fact it turned out to have the reverse effect. I received many more requests and enquiries than usual.

I was overwhelmed with cards and gifts, and the last thing I then wanted was this surprise party that could only be an anti-climax. Annie, who was in on the secret, refused to give me a clue as to whom was organising the event. If you have warning of these occasions, as a performer you can prepare some thoughts on what you might say in your thank you speech to ensure you respond in appropriate style. I reluctantly went along with the subterfuge. My assumption was that the invitation was from one of the charities for which I actively work. Facetiously I suggested to Annie that if the party was to surprise me, I could surprise them by going in my pyjamas. She firmly pointed out that I should wear something smart and formal.

The hire car duly arrived. The driver had already been made

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aware of what was happening, so we set off from our London flat in silence. All my preconceived ideas of where I might be going turned out to be incorrect as he took us to the outside of the main entrance of Broadcasting House in Portland Place. 'They don't run charity functions here,' I thought. Inside we were greeted by Trudi Stevens, the assistant to the producer of *Just a Minute*, who led us up to the Council Chamber, the central meeting place for BBC executives. Trudi ushered me into this spacious room, where there were a hundred people: actors, writers, producers and senior staff. They gave me a huge round of applause as I entered. I was overwhelmed. I stood there speechless. I recognised a lot of the faces, professional friends and others with whom I had worked. Someone had undertaken research and discovered that I had made my first professional broadcast 72 years ago performing impersonations of James Stewart and Charles Boyer on a radio variety show called *Carroll Levis Carries On* as one of what the Canadian showman called his 'discoveries' – new performers whom he tipped for success. At around the same time I was also playing small roles in productions at Glasgow BBC. This was the city in which I had been based during the War, serving an apprenticeship with a firm on Clydebank that made pumps for ships, important work for the war effort and a reserved occupation. I was endeavouring to become an engineer while dreaming of becoming a full-time entertainer.

In fact over the years since then I have rarely been off BBC radio. At different times either guesting in plays, performing in variety shows, undertaking a long spell in the BBC Drama Repertory Company, appearing in a series of *Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh* playing comedy characters, partnering my long-term colleague Arthur Haynes in his radio series and presenting the satirical programme *Listen to this Space*, a show I devised and for which I received the Radio Personality of the Year award. Also, we were just about to celebrate the 46th anniversary of *Just a Minute*, a programme with which I have been associated since the pilot show in December 1967. I have not missed a single recording, which now amounts to almost 900 performances.

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This party was to celebrate all this and more. It was a truly moving occasion and I was overwhelmed that the BBC had decided to honour me in this way. There were some brief speeches, including Paul Merton, who sent me up in his usual delightfully humorous way, and then Tilusha Ghelani, one of the producers of *Just a Minute*, played a tape that she had gone to a great deal of trouble to prepare. It consisted of some of the many humorous moments from the archives of *Just a Minute*, including an embarrassing one in which I had made an unintentional verbal slip known as a Spoonerism, referring to Tilusha as ‘Gilusha Tilhani’. The guests loved it all and laughed affectionately at the fun that was being had at my expense.

Then I was asked to say a few words. It is always a challenge when speaking to your own profession, especially when you have nothing prepared. On this occasion it was easier than I could have imagined. It was such a warm and responsive audience, all of whom were there out of affection to pay a tribute to me. It was certainly the most emotional experience of my professional life. I was deeply touched that so many show-business friends and colleagues had found time in their busy lives to assemble secretly to drink my health and toast my career, including the Director General. We humble thespians do not expect such accolades!

I mingled and talked with the many guests, hoping the party would never end. There were some lovely moments and over-the-top compliments. I just wanted to thank everyone personally for surprising me in such a delightful way. There was one particularly touching incident when Emma Freud, a charming and talented broadcaster and writer, gave me a gift of her father’s witty articles collected together in book form. I had known Emma since she was a little girl as I had been very friendly with Clement. I was not only at school with him, St Paul’s, but he had employed me regularly to work in cabaret at his Royal Court Theatre Club in Sloane Square. I even socialised with him when he entertained my wife and I at his home in St John’s Wood, where he cooked the most amazing dinners. He was, of course, a trained chef.

Emma’s thoughtful gift touched me greatly. As she presented

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the book, Emma sweetly said that she knew her dad had become grumpy with me as he grew older, but the feeling did not extend to the rest of the Freud family. I was delighted to hear such warmth and reassurance. In Clement's later years his attitude had changed from one of friendship to something approaching disdain. The reasons for this stemmed from the difference of opinion we each held over how *Just a Minute* should develop as the years passed.

In almost direct contrast to Clement, my belief had always been that if *Just a Minute* was to achieve any longevity, it would have to adjust and adapt to changing attitudes and taste. However popular a programme is, it cannot rest on its laurels. During the early days of the show there were two other panel games on radio, which were all male and very successful – *My Word!* and *My Music*. They were of their era, with a formula that never changed. As a result they slowly faded away. Success cannot be taken for granted in show business. You have to analyse what works, tweak the rules slightly, polish and improve. If you have a basic idea that is strong, and Ian Messiter had certainly created such a show with *Just a Minute*, continual refining can only improve it.

While Ian was still with us he made little changes in the early stages, together with our first producer, the very talented David Hatch, who contributed with all kinds of thoughts, ideas and, of course, creative casting. In more recent years, because of my love of the show and commitment to its success, I have in consultation with our producers, suggested small subtle adjustments that have helped to take the programme forward. These refinements, from whatever source they arose, you can read about in the following pages. I certainly do not seek any long-term credit for my input. As an experienced performer of many years, it is something that you do instinctively to improve the quality of a great product and they would not have worked if the core concept of the creator, Ian Messiter, had not been brilliant.

Putting this book together could not have been possible without some assistance from a man who is the most ardent fan of *Just a Minute*, Keith Matthews. Keith is a member of a London-based *Just*

a Minute fan club and possesses an amazing knowledge of the show from the archive of recordings he has kept. If we wanted a fact from the past, he was usually able to supply it. I must also thank Dean Bedford, a dedicated follower of the programme, who lives in New Zealand. Dean compiled the fascinating Top 20 lists that appear at the end of this book and runs a website full of interesting information on the show plus an incredible number of transcripts of broadcasts (www.just-a-minute.info). This has proved to be a very useful source on occasions.

I am indebted to my literary agent, Gordon Wise of Curtis Brown, who had the foresight to see that a book about the history of *Just a Minute* could be popular and took the idea to Canongate, where Jamie Byng saw the potential and has backed the project with enthusiasm, along with his editorial colleague Jenny Lord and the rest of the Canongate team.

It has also been my good fortune to work with a large number of very talented BBC professionals, including at the helm of the show our excellent producers, our sound engineers and, of course, the delightful whistleblowers who have sat next to me through the years. I thank them all. The BBC have been very supportive throughout the writing of this book but for the sake of clarity I must make it clear that all the opinions expressed here are my own and do not represent the views of the corporation or of anyone currently working there.

My final thanks go to a man whose literary skills and love of the programme have helped to make this book possible, David Wilson. What I have not written by hand, he has transcribed from my dictation, managing to reproduce my words with great accuracy and an instinct for my style and phraseology.

It is time to present the story of *Just a Minute*, with its fascinating history, extensive cast of superb panellists and unique format. The programme has achieved an amazing level of popularity with the general public and inspires deep affection in its devoted followers. One of the reasons for this, I believe, lies at the very heart of the show: nothing is prepared in advance. Everything you hear is improvised spontaneously, resulting in countless moments of wonderful humour,

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many of which I relive in this book. The theatre audience at the recordings are aware that what they are seeing is instantaneous comedy. I think they feel they are part of a happening and respond accordingly. The laughter being generated is very natural, which in turn spurs us on. All of this is then conveyed across the airwaves to the listener. That to me is part of the secret of *Just a Minute*.

Writing this book has been a labour of love, recalling the pleasure I have gained from being associated with such an iconic programme over so many years. Reliving those outstanding, unusual, amazing and humorous moments has allowed me to express the genuine joy I experience every time we make a recording. It has also been a pleasure to think back on my years working with some of the most talented performers in show business. These are the people who, throughout 47 years and counting, have propelled *Just a Minute* forward with panache and style.

I hope you enjoy our story.

‘Nicholas, the word “naked” is forbidden.’

It is the early 1960s and I am talking to Bill Worsley, producer of *Henry Hall’s Guest Night*, on which I am engaged to appear. We are going through my proposed act for the show. Within the BBC, everything of even a mildly risqué nature has to be cleared in advance with the producer. They are responsible if anything untoward slips through the net.

‘But, Bill, the joke doesn’t work without that. It has to finish on “and the girl let her mink coat slip to the ground leaving her standing absolutely naked”.’

Bill thinks for a moment. ‘No, I’m sorry, Nicholas. As producer I have responsibilities. There is a list of words you can’t use, and “naked” is definitely on it. Can’t you say “leaving her standing with absolutely nothing on”?’

‘Come off it, Bill. That will kill it stone dead. How about “starkers”?’

Bill picks up the booklet in front of him, rather imposingly entitled *BBC Variety Programmes Policy Guide for Writers and Producers* and flicks through the pages. I know what he is looking at; it is commonly known as ‘The Little Green Book’, the bible of BBC decency. Not that I could say such a thing on air. Religious references are one of many no-nos.

Bill looks up from the book with a smile. ‘All right, Nick, “starkers” it is. There’s nothing in here to indicate that word is banned. Good luck.’

Such was the world that BBC entertainers were living in during the so-called Swinging Sixties. Public morals were protected by

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The Little Green Book and there was nothing you could do about it. This selection of 'highlights' will, I hope, provide a sense of the broadcasting environment within which we were operating.

VULGARITY

Programmes must at all cost be kept free of crudities, coarseness and innuendo. Humour must be clean and untainted directly or by association with vulgarity and suggestiveness. Music hall, stage, and to a lesser degree, screen standards, are not suitable to broadcasting. Producers, artists and writers must recognise this fact and the strictest watch must be kept. There can be no compromise with doubtful material. It must be cut.

A. General. Well known vulgar jokes (e.g. the Brass Monkey) 'cleaned up', are not normally admissible since the humour in such cases is almost invariably evident only if the vulgar version is known.

There is an absolute ban upon the following:-

Jokes about:-

- Lavatories
- Effeminacy in men
- Immorality of any kind

Suggestive references to:-

- Honeymoon couples
- Chambermaids
- Fig leaves
- Prostitution

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- Ladies' underwear, e.g. winter draws on
- Animal habits, e.g. rabbits
- Lodgers
- Commercial travellers

Extreme care should be taken in dealing with references to or jokes about:-

- Pre-natal influences (e.g. 'His mother was frightened by a donkey')
- Marital infidelity

Good taste and decency are the obvious governing considerations. The vulgar use of such words as 'basket' must also be avoided.

* * *

Jokes built around Bible stories, e.g. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, David and Goliath, must also be avoided or any sort of parody of them.

Religious References

Reference to and jokes about different religions or religious denominations are banned. The following are also inadmissible:-

- Jokes about A.D. or B.C. (e.g. 'before Crosby')
- Jokes or comic songs about spiritualism, christenings, religious ceremonies of any description (e.g. weddings, funerals)
- Parodies of Christmas carols
- All such words as God, Good God, My God, Blast, Hell, Damn, Bloody, Gorbliney, Ruddy, etc., etc., should be deleted from scripts and innocuous expressions substituted.

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IMPERSONATIONS

All impersonations need the permission of the people being impersonated and producers must reassure themselves that this has been given before allowing any to be broadcast.

Artists' repertoires of impersonations are usually restricted to:-

- (a) leading public and political figures;
- (b) fellow artists.

As to (a) the Corporation's policy is against broadcasting impersonations of elder statesmen, e.g. Winston Churchill, and leading political figures. Any others in this category should invariably be referred.

As to (b) there is no objection, but certain artists have notified the Corporation that no unauthorised impersonations may be broadcast. The present list is given below but should be checked from time to time with the Variety Booking Manager. A double check by producers as to permission is advisable in these cases:-

- Gracie Fields
- Vera Lynn
- Ethel Revnell (with or without Gracie West)
- Renee Houston
- Jeanne de Casalis (Mrs Feather)
- Nat Mills and Bobbie
- Harry Hemsley

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POPULAR MUSIC

(a) British Music

It is the Corporation's policy actively to encourage British music so long as this does not lead to a lowering of accepted musical standards.

(b) Jazzing the Classics

The jazzing by dance bands of classical tunes or the borrowing and adaptation of them is normally unacceptable.

MISCELLANEOUS POINTS

Avoid derogatory references to:-

Professions, trades, and 'classes', e.g. solicitors, commercial travellers, miners, 'the working class'.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATION OF OVERSEAS BROADCASTS

Jokes like 'enough to make a Maltese Cross' are of doubtful value.

In addition to these strict guidelines ('jazzing the classics'! – who would dare?), advertising in any form was unacceptable, including references to newspapers. And as for jokes involving the Royal Family ...

This Reithian edifice the BBC had first erected in the 1940s and '50s was, however, beginning to crumble in the era of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The enormously enjoyable satirical television show *That Was the Week That Was*, fronted by David Frost, had started to knock holes in it during its thirteen-month run through to late

1963. A year on from then and the time was ripe for a couple of ‘rebels’ to deliver a blow that would eventually knock the wall down and pave the way for *Just a Minute*.

Step forward Alistair Foot, a writer who had worked on the popular radio sketch *The Arthur Haynes Show*, and myself.

That Was the Week That Was worked wonderfully well, but I was aware there was nothing equivalent on the radio. By 1964 I had been working with the talented comedian Arthur Haynes on the television version of his show for ten years and was keen to try my hand at something different. I admired Alistair’s writing – he had a distinctive style – and I approached him with an idea for a political satire programme for radio. Alistair was keen and we worked on the format for a show I called *Listen to This Space*, which would trample over many of The Little Green Book’s strictures if it was to work. We were going to quote from named newspapers, send up the politicians of the day with impersonations and poke fun at the Establishment in general. Talk about taking risks ...

I presented the idea to Roy Rich, then head of Radio Light Entertainment, a man I knew fairly well from his days as a theatre director. That is how the system worked in those days; performers with ideas had direct access to the key decision makers. It is a little more complicated now, with many more bureaucratic layers – otherwise known as commissioning editors – requiring navigation. Roy was a creative man, he loved our concept and immediately commissioned a pilot to be produced by the very experienced Bill Worsley and on which Alistair and I worked with another writer called Anthony Marriott. It seemed to go down well. Or so we thought anyway. The BBC executives at the time remained very nervous, worried that we had pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable too far. Even Bill thought the show was unlikely to receive the go-ahead. Indeed, a series was not commissioned until, somehow, and I think I can thank Roy Rich here, a tape of the pilot found its way on to Director General Hugh Carleton Greene’s desk. He was enthusiastic, the series received the go-ahead and went on to run for a number of years.

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As for *The Little Green Book*, it took a hit from which it never recovered and the broadcasting landscape changed forever.



It was 1967 and I am speaking to Ian Messiter, a producer and creator of radio entertainment shows. Following the success of *Listen to This Space* the Variety Club had presented me with the award for Radio Personality of the Year. I was deeply honoured, and I was hoping that this recognition would act as a springboard for me to embark on a new venture. Exactly what that was going to be, I was not sure. Ian and I had been good friends for many years, socialising together in each other's houses often, and professionally I was well aware of his talents. That's why I was here, to find out if he could help.

'Ian, *Listen to This Space* has been a great success and I've thoroughly enjoyed it, especially the opportunity to do my Edward Heath impersonations. But as the host I don't think I was really using my skills to the full. I want to return to my comedy roots for the next project and I was wondering, do you have any new programme ideas?'

'Funny you should ask, Nick. You remember *One Minute Please!*? Well, I've adapted it, made it better, I think. I tried it out when I was over in South Africa and it worked well. It's called *Just a Minute*. Would that be of interest?'

As he outlined the format of his new show I immediately saw the potential. It's hardly a surprise. It is not overstating it to say that when it comes to devising panel games, Ian is exceptional. You just have to look at his track record. As a BBC producer back in the late 1940s and early '50s he worked on the classic radio show *Twenty Questions*, chaired by Gilbert Harding, in which panellists asked 'yes' or 'no' questions in an attempt to deduce the identify of mystery objects. At the same time Ian was devising, producing and appearing in the panel game *One Minute Please!* which ran for three series before Ian left the BBC to try his luck at a commercial station in South Africa.

...on the
subject of

One Minute Please!

Ian Messiter's *One Minute Please!* (OMP!) was the progenitor to *Just a Minute*. There were key differences between the two formats – OMP! focused more on the individual panellists talking and being amusing, rather than the interaction and banter that drives *Just a Minute* – but the basic structure of the games was similar.

Ian always said that the seeds of OMP! (and therefore *Just a Minute*) were sown at Sherborne School, when his history master caught him daydreaming in class and offered him the option of facing the cane or talking about Henry VIII and his wives for two minutes without hesitation or repetition. From there the idea percolated slowly, was refined by a similar exercise given to him during his army training, and finally honed through trial runs with his wife Enid and their young family.

By 1951 the rules of *Off the Cuff*, as the game was then known, had been established, and he presented the idea to the BBC. A pilot was commissioned, with the new name *One Minute Please!*, and it proved to be an immediate hit.

OMP! was billed as a battle of the sexes in which teams of three men and three women were pitted against each other, with the winning team returning the following week. Each panellist was given a topic by chairman Roy Plomley (the creator of *Desert Island Discs*) on which they were required to talk for a minute without pausing, repeating themselves or drifting off track. Success won a point for the player's team. However, if the opposing panel considered the speaker had committed one of the specified sins they could interrupt with a buzzer and state their case. The challenge was then put before a jury of three for adjudication, the members of which changed each week. Juries comprised, for example:

- Three Charing Cross Hospital nurses
- Three police constables

- Three Windmill Theatre showgirls
- Three air hostesses
- Three Father Christmases
- Three Beverley Sisters

A correct challenge, as decided upon by the jury, scored two points; if incorrect, the speaker's team gained two points.

Ian also incorporated an additional element to the game – a 'secret word' known to the studio audience and listeners but not the panellists. This word would have some relevance to the given subject – for instance, for the topic 'Cricket' it might be 'grass'. If the speaker mentioned this word they were alerted to the fact, and awarded three points, but the specific identity of the word would not be made known until the end of the round. If during the time remaining the speaker inadvertently repeated the secret word, a point was deducted for each occurrence. All clear so far?

To add to the fun, gimmick rounds were introduced, with the speaker told, for instance, that a point would be deducted if they used the definite article.

Three series were broadcast between 1951 and 1952, comprising a total of 31 episodes, and making a radio star out of cartoonist Gerard Hoffnung. He made his debut in the third broadcast and went on to appear in all but six of the remaining shows. Following Ian's departure to South Africa in 1952, a fourth series was not commissioned. The public reaction to *OMP!* had been very favourable. Throughout the years of Ian's absence, the BBC received many hundreds of requests for copies of the rules from people who wanted to play at home and in clubs. However, it was not until Ian returned to Britain that the fourth series was broadcast, with Roy Plomley replaced by disc jockey Michael Jackson. Ian continued to push for a fifth series but that door was finally closed forever with Gerard Hoffnung's untimely death in September 1959 at the age of 34.

Why the BBC decided not to continue with *OMP!* at the

height of its success in 1952 is not clear. Although Ian had moved abroad he left extensive production notes to ensure the series continued, but nothing happened. One reason may be that Ian apparently found himself in a wrangle with the BBC over *OMP!* According to an interview with Ian published in the *Daily Sketch* at around this time, it seems the US television station DuMont had purchased the rights to produce the show for a sum said to be £285,000. If accurate, this is an astonishing figure from which, the article states, Ian was to receive a token amount. The issue was eventually settled, and many years later I read in the press that Ian had given the small fee he received to charity. Perhaps surprisingly, after this incident Ian continued to have a good relationship with the BBC, a very positive reflection on the quality of the man.

Ian returned to Britain in the mid 1950s, initially to a job in advertising, while his radio-show creativity continued to flourish. *One Minute Please!* returned for a fourth series, followed by *Many a Slip*, with Roy Plomley hosting, in which the players had to identify deliberate mistakes in written passages and musical segments, and also *Petticoat Line*, a show that invited listeners to submit questions to an all-female panel presided over by well-known broadcaster Anona Winn. He had also recently recorded a pilot for a card-based quiz show called *Fair Deal*.

‘Ian, it’s great,’ I told him, once he had finished outlining his ideas for *Just a Minute*. ‘Exactly what I was looking for. The BBC are going to love it, I’m sure.’

I was correct. Roy Rich was very positive about Ian’s idea when I presented it to him, deciding it would be ideal for the soon-to-be-launched Radio 4 (born out of the old Home Service at the end of September 1967). He immediately commissioned a pilot, handing the reins over to a very talented young producer called David Hatch. David had recently joined the corporation after appearing as a panellist on the anarchic radio comedy game *I’m Sorry, I’ll Read That*

Again, having gained experience as a performer with the Cambridge University Footlights drama club.

To chair the pilot David engaged comedian Jimmy Edwards, an excellent choice as he had proved very successful as host of the popular radio comedy panel game *Does the Team Think?* I was to be a panellist. Alongside me, David booked the multi-talented chef, restaurateur, writer and nightclub host Clement Freud, together with the hugely respected comic actress Beryl Reid, leaving one seat available for another woman.

David decided to hold a day of auditions in a studio in Broadcasting House and asked me to assist in the role of chairman, a request to which I readily agreed. David was an astute producer, with an eye and an ear for what combinations of characters and voices would gel over the airwaves, and by the end of the day's test-runs he was not convinced we had found our fourth player. He did, however, say something that proved prophetic as we sat chatting.

'I'll tell you what, Nick, we might have come up dry on a panellist, but if for any reason Jimmy Edwards can't make it for the pilot I know we've found someone else who can fit perfectly comfortably in that chair.'

I smiled at the compliment, but shook my head. 'No, no, no, David. I'm on the panel. I want to be actively involved. Not just sitting listening to others perform. And that's final.' My ambitions were fixed squarely on demonstrating my love of quick-fire, ad-lib, improvised comedy. The chairmanship held no interest for me.

'Don't worry, Nick. Jimmy's the man. I was merely passing comment on how well you did today.'

Our search for the final member of the team eventually led to an unlikely candidate – one of my neighbours, Wilma Ewart. My wife at the time, Denise, and I were friendly with Wilma and her husband who were both Americans. We'd enjoyed dinners together on a number of occasions and I had always found Wilma witty and entertaining. She had no experience of performing, as far as I knew, but when David met Wilma on my suggestion he could see the potential and offered her the job.

With the cast now in place, David's next task was to find a date to record the show, which proved harder than anticipated. At the BBC, pilots were recorded on a Sunday, and therein lay the problem. Despite repeated attempts by David to pin our chairman down, Jimmy was never available, claiming each time that he had an existing commitment to play polo. That is what David told me anyway. I always wondered if that was the real reason.

In our business, if you are offered something you think is good you go for it. You do not say no because of a polo match. I suspect that Jimmy was simply not very interested in becoming involved in this new *Just a Minute* show. His own programme, *Does the Team Think?* – featuring regular funny men such as Ted Ray, Tommy Trinder and Cyril Fletcher gagging to questions put to them by the audience, and presided over hilariously by Jimmy – was well established. Surely that was a better bet for continued success?

Whatever the reason, Jimmy Edwards' reluctance to commit left David in a difficult situation, from which he could see only one way out.

'Nick, I'm desperate to get this pilot going but Jimmy always seems to be tied up. I need a favour. Will you take the chair? I know you can handle it.'

'Absolutely not, David. I don't want the job. I'm not right for the job. I don't think I can do it. It's not me. I want to be on the panel.'

'I understand that, Nick, I do. But we're in a fix here. Tell you what, I'll do a deal with you. Be the chairman for the pilot, and if we get the series you go back on the panel. In the meantime I know Derek Nimmo is free so he can substitute for you.'

On that basis I agreed. As I said, in this profession you don't turn down work you believe will be good.

On 20 June 1967 the following memo was sent out to relevant BBC personnel.

WELCOME TO JUST A MINUTE

Just a Minute programme identified as TLN 29/LB
212 H.

Home Service has commissioned a pilot programme
of this panel game by Ian Messiter - freely
adapted from his own game One Minute Please!
which will be recorded as follows:

Date: Sunday 16th July 1967
Rehearsal: 16.00 - 18.00pm
Recording: 19.30 - 20.15pm
Studio: The Playhouse Theatre

Catering department was advised to cater for 12
people from 16.00 - 18.00pm.

The chairman will be Nicholas Parsons and the
panel will be Clement Freud, Beryl Reid, Derek
Nimmo and Wilma Ewart.

Announcer was requested to arrive at 19.00pm
to rehearse and that it be John Dunn if he be
available.



That date, Sunday 20 June 1967, marks the beginning of *Just a Minute*.
It also nearly marked the end of the show.

The pilot, recorded in front of a studio audience, was not very
good. I think we all knew it at the time. It just didn't take off in the
way we had hoped. The reasons? Well, there were a number.

The main issue, I believe, is that the rules had not yet been properly
defined. They were too loose, making it difficult for listeners to
engage in what was going on, which is of course essential. The game
became haphazard, not sharp enough, with the emphasis placed on

individuals trying to be interesting and entertaining, while the banter between the panellists was secondary. On the surface, that may not appear to be a mistake, but in my opinion a show needs boundaries that people can recognise in order for them to appreciate how clever and witty the contestants are as they bounce off each other. Without identifiable and enforceable rules, the show becomes random and bitty, with inconsistent challenges and adjudications. How can the listening audience immerse themselves in a show when they do not really understand what is happening?

The interpretation of ‘repetition’ is a good example. For the pilot, and indeed during the first few series before Ian refined his rules, ‘repetition’ seems to have related to repeating an idea rather than a word. However, that interpretation was not applied consistently. Here, for example, is Clement Freud speaking on the subject of ‘Knitting a Cable Stitch Jumper’.

Clement: You get the wool on to the knitting needle and you engage it and you then purl one, plain two, purl two, plain three, purl three, plain one, plain ...

BUZZ

Derek: Repetition.

Nicholas: Did you say hesitation or repetition?

Derek: Repetition. He said ‘purl one, purl two, purl one, purl two ...’

Nicholas: Yes, though I don’t know a great deal about knitting I thought they were all different stitches. They were all completing a jumper which would have an end product. It was building something, wasn’t it? No, I think probably I would say that Clement Freud’s still with it here, and you have an extra point, 15 seconds to go with your cable stitch jumper, going from now.

Then in the following round, Beryl Reid is talking on ‘Keeping Fit’.

Beryl: Well, I don’t hold with that at all. I think it’s absolutely awful, keeping fit. It takes up all your life! I mean, first of all, to

start with ... keeping fit ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Derek Nimmo, your challenge?

Derek: A great deal of hesitation I thought.

Nicholas: Yes, I think that's true, yes. Derek Nimmo, you have an extra point and would you continue talking now for 47 and a half seconds on the subject of 'Keeping Fit'.

Derek: Cold baths. Cold baths are absolutely essential ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Clement Freud, on what are you challenging?

Clement: Repetition. [BIG LAUGH FROM DEREK AND AUDIENCE FOLLOWED BY APPLAUSE]

Nicholas: It's not your day at the moment, is it, Derek? Clement Freud, I award you a point. Would you continue talking about 'Keeping Fit', starting now.

Derek: He said, 'purl one, purl two, purl one, purl two' six times but that didn't count! I only said 'cold bath' twice! [AUDIENCE LAUGH]

Nicholas: You've made your point. Clement Freud, would you continue on 'Keeping Fit', starting now.

How could anyone make any sense of those rulings?

There were other problems. On the surface Beryl Reid was an obvious choice, but when it came to the recording it quickly became clear that improvisation was not her metier. Beryl was a talented variety performer, actress, and a funny and engaging comedienne, who would go on to appear in a range of comic and straight roles, including a lesbian actress in the controversial film *The Killing of Sister George* and the part of Connie Sachs in the BBC's adaptations of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and *Smiley's People*. What Beryl was used to was a script or a well-rehearsed routine. That takes great skill, no doubt about it, but it was not what was required for *Just a Minute*. Beryl did her utmost to contribute, and she made numerous interjections, but very few of them really came off.

Then there was myself. My manner can best be described as

laborious – verbose, even – which may have been the style then, but it comes across as rather pompous now. In addition, to add to the general sense of confusion I often awarded points haphazardly. In this example, Wilma Ewart is speaking on the very first subject – ‘Excuses for Being Late’.

Wilma: The important thing about excuses for being late is never, never tell the truth. If one is really in difficulty and caught by the traffic, one should never say so. Only that there was an accident and you had to stop to give the kiss of life! [AUDIENCE LAUGH]

BUZZ

Nicholas: Beryl Reid, on what are you challenging?

Beryl: Hesitation.

Nicholas: Well, I don’t think she hesitated and I award you a bonus point, Wilma. Continue talking, please, for another 40 seconds on ‘Excuses for Being Late’.

Why did I award a ‘bonus point’ there? It should just have been a point for an incorrect challenge.

Wilma then continues.

Wilma: Yes, we had a great American author called F. Scott Fitzgerald who was always late. Always late. And he had a million good excuses for that. He, for instance, came in to meet his publisher who was very important to him, you know and ... er ... directed his whole life ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Clement Freud, you’ve challenged. On what basis?

Clement: Well, I haven’t said anything yet. I thought ...

[BIG AUDIENCE LAUGH AND APPLAUSE]

Nicholas: You have received your round of applause and you’ve made your presence felt. Now, seriously, as regards the game, on what do you challenge Wilma Ewart?

Clement: Ah, hesitation with just a *touch* of deviation!

[AUDIENCE LAUGH]

Nicholas: I can't give you any extra points for the *touches* but I will give you a point for the deviation, yes.

I am wrong there as well. There was no deviation, perhaps a slight hesitation and, yes, repetition of 'always late' which no one picked up on because the rules were still somewhat fluid in everyone's mind – but deviation?

This example highlights one of the more negative aspects of that pilot, but it also acts as an illustration of what could work well. Clement's first ever challenge on *Just a Minute*, 'Well, I haven't said anything yet,' is very witty and in keeping with the spirit and ethos of the show as it developed.

The fact that in this very first show I play with the concept of 'bonus points' (incorrectly as it happens, with Wilma Ewart, above) is another positive that can be taken from the pilot. Some clever and amusing interjections had generated big laughs (such as Clement's play on the pronunciation of 'pause', below) and although the awarding of bonus points faded away once the rules became more defined (I reintroduced the concept years later to add to the humour) such interjections were clearly to be encouraged as they contributed to the overall sense of fun.

Here Derek has taken up the subject of 'Keeping Fit', cleverly referring back to his 'cold baths' from earlier, much to the amusement of the audience.

Derek: Chilled liquid is terribly important for keeping fit. Every morning I would advise people who are listening to this programme to leap into cooled ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Beryl Reid, you challenged.

Beryl: Hesitation!

Nicholas: Beryl, you seemed to watch Derek's lips because you challenged on the same basis last time. What were you trying to say, Derek?

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Derek: I was trying to say w-w-water. [AUDIENCE LAUGH]

Nicholas: No, you weren't stuttering, you were fishing for a word.

Derek: In the water!

Nicholas: Well, your word wasn't in the water. The point goes to Beryl Reid. Would you continue, you have just under 30 seconds to talk about 'Keeping Fit', Beryl Reid, starting now.

Beryl: Well, if you have a cold bath that closes your pores. If you have a hot bath that opens them. Eventually ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Clement Freud, you're challenging?

Clement: Pores! [BIG LAUGH FROM PANEL AND AUDIENCE FOLLOWED BY APPLAUSE]

Neither Beryl Reid nor Wilma Ewart ever appeared on *Just a Minute* again, Beryl, I think, because her particular style of performance did not fit the show and Wilma because she and her husband moved back to the US. I cannot say whether David Hatch would have engaged Wilma again, but in the pilot I think she does well, contributing some offbeat and humorous lines, in particular this somewhat surreal take on 'Phrenology'. Derek eventually brings Wilma to a halt with a successful challenge, not for repetition (which would undoubtedly have been the case today) but for hesitation as Wilma struggles to complete her sentence. It is amazing to think that modern players *do* manage to produce moments such as this without any repetition.

Wilma: Phrenology is a science, as you all know. It began in Polynesia where it was the custom of the natives to bang their heads together. This was a greeting rather than rubbing noses or shaking hands. So the more people ... the more bumps on a person's head indicated how friendly he was. [AUDIENCE LAUGH] How many friends he had. And the natives in Polynesia are splendid at reading one's head to discover if your friends are sincere, warm, or ... if they're ...

BUZZ

Following the recording I found myself more in a state of hope rather than expectation that a series would be commissioned. David Hatch, however, was determined. He knew we had something special here, he saw the potential despite its initial flaws, and fought hard on our behalf in the less-than-enthusiastic corridors of power at the BBC.

David told me later that he had been willing to put his job on the line to secure a series for *Just a Minute*, and I suspect that part of the BBC's decision to give him the green light was that they did not wish to risk losing such a clearly talented producer. The process took some time to reach a conclusion, but eventually David came to me with the good news. Well, mostly good news.

‘Nick, as you know they didn’t like it, and they were reluctant to commission a series. I know we made some mistakes, we struggled a bit in certain areas, but all that can be put right. We’ve learned what works and what doesn’t. There’s huge potential, and it is on that basis I have fought hard to get us the series, and at last I’ve won, with one caveat. The one thing they did like about the pilot was your chairmanship. So I’m afraid if we are to go ahead you are stuck in the chair.’

Frankly, the fact that the executives upstairs liked ‘Nicholas Parsons’ as chairman surprised me; *I did not like Nicholas Parsons as chairman!* It had not been my best performance – too stilted, in my opinion. However, even if I was not particularly happy about this turn of events, I was not about to complain. I had been offered a whole series and that is not something you turn down. I thought, well, I can draw on my professional experience from many areas of the business to make this job work for me and for the show. That has been my approach ever since.

Trying to analyse the BBC reaction now, perhaps the truth is that my performance as chairman appealed to them because it was in the prevalent style of that era, quite stiff and correct. I was forcing it, projecting myself in the way I thought it should be done, rather than in the way I would do it naturally. Over time, a more natural approach evolved.



The first series of *Just a Minute* consisted of sixteen shows, broadcast from 22 December 1967 (the pilot) to 5 April 1968, with myself, Clement and Derek appearing in every episode, supported by a variety of female guests including, amongst others, actresses Andree Melly (seven shows), Betty Marsden (two), Charmian Innes (two) plus once-only visits from agony-aunt Marjorie Proops and Una Stubbs. Sheila Hancock also made her first appearance, in our second broadcast.

...on the
subject of

Whistles, Hooters, Cuckoos and Bells

Ian Messiter had two of the best ears in the business for what makes radio work, and in the 1950s and '60s he judged that a cacophony of noises to entertain the audience, disrupt proceedings and startle contestants was just the job.

In *One Minute Please!* he incorporated:

- a hammer and block to indicate the start of the player's minute
- a cymbal and brush to announce that the 60 seconds had elapsed
- an electric bell to alert the speaker to the fact that the secret word had been stumbled upon
- a klaxon horn to highlight every subsequent mention of that secret word

Just a Minute was no exception.

For the first couple of shows Ian employed a cuckoo noise to indicate the completion of the minute. From show seven he alternated between a whistle and a bicycle hooter and then stayed with the hooter for the remainder of that first series. In Series 2 Ian migrated to a doorbell-style buzzer to announce

} the completion of the 60 seconds. It was not until our third }
series that the now familiar whistle became established.

Throughout the first series Ian Messiter acted as whistleblower, scorer and timekeeper (as he did almost consistently up to the show broadcast on 30 May 1989). To aid Ian the BBC supplied a traditional stopwatch, which ran forwards, showing the seconds that had elapsed. That may not sound particularly relevant, but in the heat of the game, with so much on which to concentrate (did he deviate? did she repeat a word there?), when Ian showed me the stopwatch it required swift mental arithmetic to calculate how many seconds remained. That wasn't a problem when, say, ten seconds had passed, but if it was seventeen, that could be tricky as this delightful snippet on the subject 'Spooks' from 4 November 1968 involving Kenneth Williams and newcomer Geraldine Jones illustrates.

Geraldine: Spooks's Christian name was Jim. He was a very tall, thin young man and he used to drink vast quantities of whisky and brandy. And because all the people he associated with were high-powered dynamic wits, they used to make lots of puns on his name and call him Spirits for short. Of course he used to also ... live in a ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Kenneth Williams.

Kenneth: Hesitation.

Nicholas: Hesitation. I agree, you have another point.

Kenneth, you have 48 seconds for ... no less than ... no, 43 seconds for 'Spooks' starting now.

Kenneth: This is of course the plural form of 'to cock a snook', which means to act derisively with a form of gesture ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Geraldine Jones.

Geraldine: Regrettably, deviation.

Nicholas: Yes, could you justify it just for the audience?

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Geraldine: Well, ‘snooks’ instead of ‘spooks’ with a P.

Nicholas: Yes, and it’s spooks.

Kenneth: Oooh! Your diction’s dreadful! [HUGE AUDIENCE LAUGH AND LONG APPLAUSE]

Nicholas: However *bad* my diction may be, if you’d been listening to Geraldine Jones *at all* attentively, you’d realise that she was on about spirits and such like.

Kenneth: But I’m concentrating on whether she hesitates or not. How can I be expected to follow what she’s saying?! [BIG LAUGH]

Ian and I accepted the stopwatch situation for a number of years – I doubt we thought there was any option – but fortunately now the watch counts down, making my job much easier.

That first series can be categorised as a ‘slow burner’. Having finally been commissioned we knew improvements on the pilot were required and with 15 shows in which to hone and develop the game, myself, Ian, Clement and Derek were confident we would soon gain ground, even if we were not a huge instant success as demonstrated by the mixed Audience Research Report commissioned after the pilot was broadcast.

AN AUDIENCE RESEARCH REPORT

JUST A MINUTE

A Panel Game

Produced by David Hatch

Friday, 22nd December, 1967. 7.30–8.00 pm,

Radio 4

Size of audience (based on results of the Survey of Listening and Viewing)

It is estimated that the audience for this

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broadcast was 0.8% of the population of the United Kingdom.

Reaction of audience (based on questionnaire completed by a sample of the audience. This sample, 246 in number, is the 17% of the Listening Panel who heard all or most of the broadcast.)

The reaction of this sample of the audience were distributed as follows:-

A+	A	B	C	C-
%	%	%	%	%
12	27	40	18	3

giving a REACTION INDEX of 57. The average of Panel Games for the first nine months of the year was 68.

This new panel game in which each member of a team of four scores if able to talk for one minute on a given subject (unless interrupted for hesitation, going off the point, deviation, or repeating himself), met with a somewhat lukewarm response from a good many of those reporting. This type of panel game depended to a great extent on the skill and personality of those taking part and although Derek Nimmo and Clement Freud certainly managed to 'hold this first show together', the basic idea of the game, it was felt, was 'dangerously thin', and likely to pall after a few hearings. Moreover the organization of the game seemed 'amateurish' and 'uncertain'. Panellists had interrupted each other far too frequently without justification, and the constant stops

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and starts had proved irritating, some said, making the game appear 'bitty' and disjointed. It was also suggested that the studio audience ('who should always be unobtrusive in radio') had played too large a part in the proceedings and that it would be preferable if the umpire would make his own decisions without recourse to them. Their laughter had often drowned the speakers' words and, sitting at home, some felt it was hard to share the audience's enjoyment:-

- 'There was too much team and audience, interruptions, claque applause and so-called "deviations", which together made a mish-mash of what appeared to be talking for talking's sake, instead of giving "just a minute" to the actual subject calling for discussion. None of it made sense. None of it was good nonsense. It was a rather mediocre bonanza for the boys and their women panellists.' (Invalid)
- 'Silly, pointless interruptions. Nothing the team had to say was interesting or amusing - and if by any chance it was - they weren't allowed to really get going. Points system, quite pointless!' (Clerk)

Moreover, the contestants were unequally matched, the two men, Derek Nimmo and Clement Freud completely overshadowing the lady panellists, Beryl Reid and Wilma Ewart, both of whom seemed to lack confidence or wit, thus contributing little to the game. Nicholas Parsons was also sometimes criticised by those who felt as chairman and umpire he was not always in control of the panel, nor

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always quite fair in his judgments, several accusing him of having 'a bias against the female participants'. One small group wondered whether the claim that Just a Minute was a new panel game was correct as they were reminded of a programme back in the fifties called One Minute Please! which, they said, they had enjoyed more. Unfavourable comparisons were also sometimes made with such other light entertainment programmes as Listen to This Space, My Word!, The Tennis Elbow Foot Game, etc. But whether as a new idea or a 're-hash' of an old one, a considerable number of those reporting thought it might well prove successful in the long run, but had 'got off to a rather poor start'.

- 'The idea is quite a good one and the team tonight were capable and amusing, but the tendency to challenge every natural pause as a "hesitation" becomes irritating and often spoils an entertaining line of thought.'
(Housewife)
- 'I don't think this idea has "sold" itself to us yet. Probably when members of the panel become more efficient it may prove more entertaining. Tonight it became a contest between Derek Nimmo and Clement Freud. The women hardly ranked as "also rans".' (No occupation)

For two in every five of those reporting, this was a lively start to what promised to be a very successful and popular radio panel game ('Who but Ian Messiter could have thought up this ingenious and unusual game?') and some

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thought it the best they had heard. It was much harder than one would think, they said, to speak extempore on a subject 'at literally a second's notice', and the efforts of the various contestants had resulted in 'an immensely entertaining half-hour's listening'. The players, though a little uncertain at first, had soon got into their stride, with the 'brilliantly funny', attractive voiced Derek Nimmo leading the way to the winning post, closely followed by the 'droll' and quick-witted Clement Freud with his dead-pan humour. The rivalry between the two (sometimes venomous it seemed) had proved the high-spot of the evening, even for many of those who were not particularly enthusiastic about the game as such, and the women, though a little hesitant about challenging, had done quite well whenever they had had the chance to speak, which it seemed was none too often ('Beryl Reid often cut off in her prime'). Nicholas Parsons ('a bright and bold chairman') had, they thought, kept the game moving at a brisk pace and adjudicated fairly, though he had had a difficult task. In the words of one satisfied listener, a Market Gardener, this was 'a delightful new enterprise with openings for all kinds of fun and games'. It had been, some said, uproariously funny! ('In spite of being in the throes of an acute virus infection, I just sat giggling quite helplessly.') Though this enthusiastic response was not shared by everybody, it was frequently felt that if improvements could be made, Just a Minute had 'distinct possibilities for the future'.

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1st February 1968



For the pilot, Ian had partly integrated one particular aspect from *One Minute Please!*, the idea of the studio audience (similar to the jury concept in *OMP!*) deciding on the merits of borderline challenges. As the audience report indicates, that met with a mixed reaction.

Ian was one of the most imaginative individuals I have ever met, and by show seven he had decided that further embellishments to the basic rules were required to add some spice to proceedings. Once again he referred back to *OMP!*, introducing the idea of 'penalty rounds'. The first of these arrived with the subject 'Gate Crashing', on which Derek Nimmo was asked to speak without using the word 'I'.

Derek clearly found it intimidating, stumbling after only a few words, while Clement, who had challenged for hesitation, adopted a very clever approach, substituting 'we' for 'I' and sailing through to the end of the minute.

More followed in the same show: 'What to Sell at a Jumble Sale' without using 'no' or 'and'; 'This Audience' without saying 'the'. It continued through the remainder of this and the next series: 'Hollywood' without 'the'; 'Toothpicks' without 'and'; 'Relations' without 'to', 'too', or 'two'; 'Getting a Break' without 'of'.

On paper these penalty rounds look like good ideas, adding an extra element of skill and offering the opportunity for more challenges. However, in reality I think they proved to be inhibiting, especially for non-regular players.

Although Derek, Clement and then Kenneth Williams, who joined *Just a Minute* in Series 2, soon conjured up their own methods to work around the imposed restrictions, other players found them too stifling. *Just a Minute* is a difficult enough game to play without an extra inhibiting factor. Back then panellists were not even allowed

to repeat the words on the subject card, although a certain amount of indiscriminate leeway was permitted in this respect. Clever and entertaining challenges, and the banter that follows them, are the core of the game; too many stops and starts, based purely on verbal errors, interrupt the flow too severely.

No matter how clever the regulars were, however, they too often found themselves caught out by these rounds, as in this example from a Series 1 broadcast of 15 March 1968, featuring a very sharp challenge from Charmian Innes.

Nicholas: Now, Derek Nimmo, it is your turn to begin and I think it's about time we had a penalty because you're all playing the game so well. So I'll mention the subject first to give you a moment's thought about it, 'Writing Thank You Letters'. We want you to talk about it for just a minute and never mention the word 'and' if you can, starting now.

Derek: Writing thank you letters is a curious English invention. It causes great misfortune to small children just before Christmas because they know that immediately after they've received those lovely inviting presents underneath the tree ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Clement Freud.

Clement: Mistake. No, I'm sorry.

Nicholas: Right, 'Writing Thank You Letters'. I won't penalise anybody at this point. With, oh, a lot of time left, no 'and's, Derek Nimmo, starting now.

Derek: And ...

BUZZ

Nicholas: Clement Freud did press his buzzer!

Derek: Now, may I just justify that?

Nicholas: All right, you'll have to be clever again though.

Derek: *Andrew* is a friend staying with me!

Nicholas: Now, Derek, we only have your word for that!

Derek: Well, I presumably laid this trap for old Freud!

Nicholas: Yes! As I get brickbats from the other three if I give

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a point to somebody else, I'm not going to be the final judge of this. I'm going to let our delightful audience sitting here decide whether you think he was going to say 'Andrew' or not. If you agree, if you think he was going to say 'Andrew' will you cheer. And if you don't think he was, boo. And do it now.

[CHEERS AND BOOS FROM THE AUDIENCE]

Nicholas: The cheers have it! So you were going to say 'Andrew' and you have a point. You have the subject of 'Writing Thank You Letters', with no 'and's, and no more *Andrews* either! Starting now.

Derek: And ...

BUZZ

Derek: ... drocles and the Lion ... [BIG LAUGH]

Nicholas: What did you say?

Derek: Androcles and the Lion!

Nicholas: Right!

Derek: You asked me to clarify!

Nicholas: Charmian, you challenged.

Charmian: Because of Androcles 'and'! I didn't think it was Androcles *Andrew*!

Nicholas: Very clever! Androcles and the Lion. You're quite right, there is an 'and'! Um, Charmian Innes, there are 40 seconds left for 'Writing Thank You Letters', no 'and', no *Andrew*, no *Androcles*, starting now.

Charmian: The trouble with writing these letters is when you do, you've usually forgotten what present people gave you. And ... ahhhhhh!

BUZZ

In introducing these penalty rounds Ian must have thought he had devised a clever gimmick that would be tremendous fun. What Ian did not possess, however, was a natural performer's instinct. It just was not how his brain worked. As a result, he did not quite realise that he had already produced the ideal stage, in the form of the basic concept of the game, on which entertainers could entertain. No

further embroidery was required. With the addition of the penalty rounds, Ian had overcomplicated the show, and risked damaging it.

Ian, of course, was too clever, and cared far too deeply about *Just a Minute*, to allow that to happen. By our third series he too had come to the conclusion that the penalty rounds were unnecessary and began to use them very sparingly. In Series 4 they had gone altogether, although occasional appeals for audience adjudication did continue through into the 1980s. Perhaps these should have been dropped earlier as well. Kenneth Williams certainly seemed to think so, and I have considerable sympathy for the opinion (if not his critique of my performance!) he sets out in the following letter to our then producer Simon Brett.

4/11/69

Dear Simon,

Thank you for your letter. Yes I did go quite 'numb' on that second show I remember. I'm afraid it ALWAYS occurs when the chair gets weak. Decisions should be made and points awarded, without these ENDLESS holdups where the justice of the thing is discussed. It is just boring.

On that game he kept asking the audience to vote for everything and it just SLOWS you down. It destroys the momentum of the game. Its essence is speed. Once you LOSE it, you lose everything. All the playing of the game goes ...

K



When David Hatch received the call from his BBC bosses informing him that they wanted a quick, six-show second series, it came too late for Derek Nimmo to take part. He had already committed himself to a filming schedule. A replacement had to be found, and it is here that David produced a stroke of genius in booking Kenneth Williams.

I had known Kenneth for many years – we had appeared together in repertory in Bromley back in the late 1940s – and although I had