

## French humour has finesse says Dame Helen. Vraiment?

GOD bless Dame Helen Mirren for flying the flag for British acting.

I'm not sure if she adheres to the Stanislavsky method school, where the actor "lives" the part, or the old school of "Try acting, dear boy; it's much easier", as preferred by Laurence Olivier, but whichever, she does manage to get right in character, whether she's playing HM The Queen or tough-as-old-boots DCI Jane Tennison.

However, away from the TV and movie screens, Dame Helen, who lives in Los Angeles, appears to be less than happy with her native Britain and its people. In an interview for French magazine *Paris Match*, she describes modern Britain as an "angry" and "cruel" society. Asked whether British values such as decency were being lost, she said: "I'm under the impression that this notion is disappearing from our society where conflicts are made worse on cinema and television, where people are nasty and cruel on the internet and where, in general terms, everybody seems to me to be very angry." This causes her a lot of pain.



MY VIEW  
STEPHANIE SMITH

British comedy comes in for specific stick, with La Mirren saying she prefers the "finesse" of French humour. "English humour is harsher, more scathing, more cruel and more surreal too, as illustrated by *Monty Python* and the TV series *Little Britain*."

Dame Helen's understanding of what passes for humour in France

differs vastly from my own, as my most memorable experience was when, aged 15 and on a family holiday, I ventured alone into a rural French café and was pounced upon by a bunch of leering youths who sniggered as they thrust into my face topless images of Lady Di that one French magazine had mocked-up – but hey, finesse is in the eye of the beholder.

Nor does everyone agree with Dame Helen that the British penchant for scathing comedic attacks, especially when targeting politicians, is a bad thing. It shows what living in LA does to even the feistiest British dame.

Maybe she is preparing for a role as a bitter old ex-pat, or perhaps she's just giving the (French) people what they want – in which case she's hamming it up just a teeny bit when she tells *Paris Match* how, as a teenage *ingenue*, she longed to be French. "Everything French was very exciting to me," she cooed. "I read Rimbaud and Verlaine, whom I found extremely romantic. I smoked Gitanes to appear cool, and I dreamed of being French." Hmm.

*Peu importe*, because Dame Helen, 65, remains magnificent even when adding her increasingly grumpy voice to that fabulous brigade of 60-something women now striding, or dancing, their way across British media – along with Joanna Lumley, 64, Ann Widdecombe, 63, and Felicity Kendal, 64.

Scathe not if these women keep giving us the benefit of their opinions. We should be delighted that, finally, they are being asked for them.

FRONT COVER: Don Draper and Joan Harris, characters from TV's *Mad Men*. PICTURE: PA/BBC/AMC/LIONSGATE

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# Hansa's – the story

## INTERVIEW



It is 25 years since Hansa Dabhi opened her vegetarian Indian restaurant in Leeds. Catherine Scott caught up with her.

THE black and white photograph hanging proudly on the wall of Hansa's Gujarati Vegetarian restaurant says it all. A young Hansa Dabhi smiling nervously next to Indian cricketer Kapil Dev with her husband Kish and their two young sons, Manesh and Anand.

The photograph marks the opening of Hansa's restaurant in Leeds. Close by on an adjacent wall a picture of the woman who inspired her to cook, her grandmother. For a woman 25 years ago setting up a business with no prior knowledge of catering, other than for children's parties and events, it would have been a challenge.

But for an Asian woman from a strict Hindu family with two young sons it was even more of an uphill battle. It was also one of the first vegetarian restaurants in the North at the time.

"We knew there was a demand out there for an Indian vegetarian restaurant serving authentic home cooked food," says Hansa.

"There was nowhere for us to eat, so we thought there must be people in the same situation as us. But we were totally taken aback by the demand." Demand has come not only from the Indian community as they thought and 80 per cent of their regulars are non-vegetarians.

Accolades have been piled upon Hansa and her loyal team of female staff. Her chef has been with her since opening day and she gives talks and demonstrations with proceeds going to her chosen charities. A successful cookery book published ten years ago has, this month, been followed by a sequel due to public demand.

*Hansa's: More than just a restaurant... It's my life!* not only includes many of her mouth-watering recipes and an introduction to Ayurveda and the medicinal properties of food, it gives an insight into Hansa and her family.

"It was very hard opening the restaurant," she admits. "My sons were very young and I was working all hours

and of course I did miss them. But I love this place. When people come here it is like they are coming into my home. I have never once not wanted to come to the restaurant.

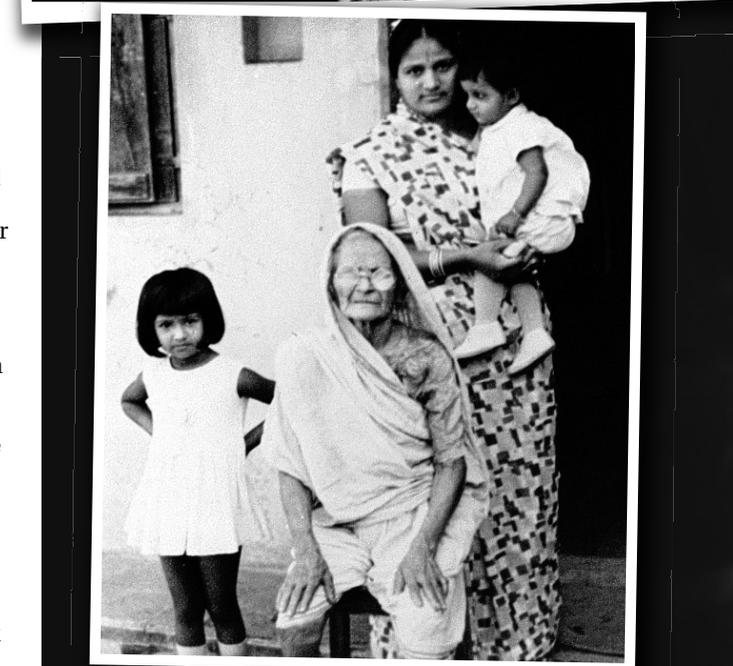
"All my staff are like members of my family. We look after each other and we help each other out when we are having problems. I wouldn't have it any other way."

Born in Uganda in 1956, Hansa remembers being brought up one of seven children in a tiny two-bedded hut. Her father was in the British Army. When her father left the army they moved to Kampala. "This was probably the worst move ever," recalls Hansa. "Work for father was quite difficult to find, so mum ended up doing domestic work for other well-to-do families. One room was all we could afford, so that became the living room, the kitchen and the bedroom for all six of us." It is probably here that a young Hansa developed her work ethic.

"I can't believe it when I talk about my childhood. I have never been lucky enough to have things put on my plate, I have really had to work for things."

But it was when Idi Amin took over Uganda and started to persecute Indians that they fled to Leeds where her father had already found work as a labourer two years earlier.

"What a shock to our system that was," says Hansa. "From literally scraping a living, doing anything and any job to make a few shillings for our



FAMILY HISTORY: From top, the opening of Hansa's restaurant in 1986, and Hansa Dabhi's grandmother, one of her inspirations.

daily bread, to living in a four-bedroomed terraced house, with a kitchen and outside toilets." She may come from a traditional Hindu family, but Hansa is no stranger to breaking taboos.

When she was 20 she met Kish, 25, a laboratory

technician at Leeds University.

"Hansa's parents were very strict Hindus," says Kish. "They liked me but my family was from a different caste from them so we knew they would never agree to the marriage."

So the young couple took the difficult and brave decision to elope. "It was a very traumatic time and not nearly as romantic as it sounds. I knew I was upsetting my parents and they would disown me," says Hansa. But it wasn't just her family that disowned her it was the entire community.

"I knew it would happen, but I had to marry someone I really liked, I couldn't see myself in an arranged marriage.

"I had to take a risk. I have always done that."



SECRET INGREDIENT: Hansa's cooking has won many awards.