

Jennifer Saunders with
Joanna Lumley in a
scene from the
Absolutely Fabulous film



“Turning 60 can’t be that bad”

Home is where the heart is for this versatile comedienne. By **Simon Evans**

IT IS the winter of 1980 and backstage at The Comic Strip, London’s trendiest hang-out, The Menopause Sisters are waiting to make their entrance.

The setting is the Boulevard Theatre, above Soho’s Raymond Revuebar strip club, an unlikely host for what would turn out to be a comedy revolution. The Comic Strip had been running at the venue since October, and The Menopause Sisters, better known to you and me as Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, had breezed through the club audition largely because of their gender. In those days female comedians were distinctly thin on the ground.

Getting through the audition was just the start of it, however. The club’s compere Alexei Sayle could be merciless with anyone who was less than talented, and the trick was to last the full eight minutes on stage allocated to each act and not get ‘gonged off’.

Waiting to make their entrance at the start of the evening the two former trainee teachers had already decided to ditch the Menopause Sisters name but had not decided on a

replacement. An impatient Alexei Sayle did it for them: “Ladies and gentlemen, French and Saunders”, he told the boisterous, baying audience.

On this, their first night at the Comedy Strip, the previous act had been interrupted by a racist heckler. Bottles were thrown, a fight broke out and the police were called, but French and Saunders ploughed on.

“We were complete novices, we’d come straight from college and had never come across anything like this before,” recalled Saunders many years later.

The profile of both performers and audience at The Comic Strip in those

days was very male-dominated, but on that night, and on many more to follow, the duo held their own and found an effective way of dealing with the inevitable hecklers.

On one occasion, after being asked to display part of her female anatomy by a member of the audience, Dawn French strode to the front of the stage and, using her best teacherly voice, told the jobs to shut up. They didn’t make a sound for the rest of the evening.

Jennifer Saunders had met her future partner and lifelong friend Dawn French at the Central School of Speech and

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Drama. Dawn was on a drama teaching course, as was Saunders, much to her chagrin – she thought she had been enlisted as a performer.

The two did not get on at all, Jennifer regarding Dawn as a “cocky little upstart”, while Dawn regarded Jennifer as a snob. Gradually the relationship thawed, however, especially when the girls discovered they had more in common than they thought, in particular that both their fathers had served in the RAF.

Jennifer’s father, Tom, actually reached the rank of Air Marshall, and as the family was constantly moving around, she attended a number

“It’s still easier for a gang of boys to get a show on than it is for a gang of girls”

of boarding schools, including St Paul’s independent school in London. Although Jennifer was born in Sleaford, Lincolnshire, her father having being posted at nearby RAF Cranwell, the family eventually settled in rural Acton Bridge in Cheshire, when Tom left the air force to take up a job with British Aerospace.

Jennifer’s mother, Jane, taught biology at a local private day school so, yes, Jennifer was a bit posh, although she disappointed her mother by turning

down the chance to try for Oxford or Cambridge University, preferring to apply for drama school after working for a year in Italy as an au pair.

At drama school, having bonded with Dawn over their similar family upbringing and love of performing, she ended up sharing a flat with her future comedy partner.

Dawn recalled those early days: “We lived together in Chalk Farm and Jennifer had a room at the top of the house. We got broken into once and the police said, ‘Well, it is quite bad, but the worst is that room at the top’. And, of course, nobody had been in there.”

After establishing themselves at the Comic Strip, Jennifer and Dawn were cast in a spin-off TV film, *Five Go Mad In Dorset*, which also featured many of the other performers who had cut their teeth at the club, including Rik Mayall, Peter Richardson and Jennifer’s future husband Adrian Edmondson.

Screened as part of Channel 4’s first night of broadcasting, in November 1982, it was a brilliant spoof of the Enid Blyton Famous Five books and an instant hit, being swiftly followed immediately by five more



Jennifer Saunders with her husband Ade Edmondson

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self-contained Comic Strip TV films, and several more over the next few years.

Jennifer continued to perform with the team right up until 2012, but it is her collaboration with Dawn French on the TV sketch show *French and Saunders* that is perhaps most fondly remembered, at least until a certain blowsy PR diva burst onto our screens in 1992.

French and Saunders ran from 1987 until 2004 and its mix of naturalistic, observational comedy and parody was an instant hit, spinning off into a series of lucrative tours. The pair were eventually rewarded with a Bafta fellowship in 2009, the first double act since Morecambe and Wise to receive the honour.

Successful though it was, there was always creative space within the partnership for solo projects, and in 1992 Jennifer lunched Edina Monsoon, the PR woman from hell, on the world, in the TV series *Absolutely Fabulous*.

Eddie Monsoon had been the title of an early Comic Strip film, written by and starring Adrian Edmondson (Eddy Monsoon is a much-used Edmondson nickname, derived from his name), but the character bore little relation to Edina other than being monstrous, spoilt and

self-regarding. A more direct relation was a French and Saunders sketch about a mother who acted like a teenager and her daughter, who behaved like an adult, and this would prove to be the central dynamic of *Absolutely Fabulous*, along with Edina’s friendship with the monstrous Patsy, played with obvious relish by Joanna Lumley.

Although intended as a satire of the fashion and PR industries, the series was soon co-opted by the very people it was taking aim at. Although the series eventually lost its edge, perhaps for this very reason, the success of the recent feature film suggested there were still plenty of laughs to be wrought from the essential absurdity of Patsy and Edina’s rarefied lifestyle.

Jennifer herself is more accepting of her age than Edina is in the film.

“I think there’s a natural time when you just think: ‘I don’t want to know about any new bands. I’m happy, I don’t need to know about everything that’s happening all the time.’”

She’s only just got on to Facebook, “and I’m finding it very useful. It’s the only way I get to see photographs of my children.”

Jennifer enjoyed another big hit more recently with *Jam and Jerusalem*, drawing on her own former lifestyle in rural

Devon for a charming portrait of village life centred on the fictional Clatterford WI. The brilliant cast included Dawn French, Sue Johnston, David Mitchell, Pauline McLynn and Sally Phillips and the off-screen chemistry between the actors was evident on-screen.

“It’s about a community where people care about each other,” Saunders said. “That’s what we mostly do. We don’t mostly deal drugs and stab each other.”

She put the success of the show down to the fact that it appealed to an older audience, one often ignored by TV executives, which is perhaps why it was inexplicably cancelled by the BBC in 2010, despite consistently high ratings, prompting Saunders to temporarily part company with the Corporation.

“Now, television is so executive-led that you really have to jump through hoops to get anything done,” she told the *Guardian*. “In our day it was, like: ‘Oh, you seem to be doing quite well in the clubs, we’re going to give you a TV show and then we’ll give you two seasons to see if you get better.’”

Jennifer and Ade Edmondson, who have been married for 31 years, were friends for six years before they became romantically involved. “We’re not too complicated about it,” Jennifer says. “I think often people over-analyse things. Ade and I argue very little. I think it’s to do with the fact that, if you know you’re heading for one, you avoid it and you compromise.”

Having lived in Devon for many years, raising their three, now grown-up, daughters, Ella, Beattie and Freya, the couple eventually moved back to London, although they still have a home in the country.

Jennifer says she loves the outdoor life, especially being surrounded by a menagerie of animals. “Chickens are the best thing in the world. You spend hours looking at chickens, it’s like a little soap opera. I used to go out in the morning to feed them, take the kids to school and come back, and still be out there at about 11.30.” It’s this rootedness in place and family that has perhaps helped Jennifer



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Jennifer Saunders with long-time pal Dawn French

overcome recent setbacks, the closure of her Spice Girls musical and her diagnosis with breast cancer in 2009.

She underwent chemotherapy and was put on the drug Tamoxifen, which triggered the menopause, but insists she is now over the cancer, at least as much as you ever can be.

“You’re never quite over it, because I’m going back on Tamoxifen. I came off it after five years for a break. I wanted to know what was age and what was side-effect. If I go back on it, I’ll know what’s the drug and what’s me.”

Now cited as an influence by just about every high-profile female comic on the planet, Jennifer is still angered by the boys’ club mentality that still exists in the TV world.

“It’s still easier for a gang of boys to get a show on than it is for a gang of girls, and I don’t know why that is. I think there’s still an expectation that there is women’s humour or girls’ humour.”

But, at the age of 58, she is as relaxed about her talent as she is about the prospect of turning 60, and she doesn’t have far to look for an excellent role model.

“Joanna (Lumley) has just turned 70 and she doesn’t seem to have changed at all so I think, ‘It can’t be that bad, can it?’”



Jennifer Saunders with the Comic Strip team in *Five Go Mad In Dorset*

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