

Children's reactions surprise wicked witch Babs Wheelton

By PETER DEAN



Babs Wheelton (the Wicked Witch) and Darryl Boyd (Danny O'Dibble) . . . both Goon fans.

IF BABS WHEELTON feels rueful about the bumps and bruises she sustains as the Saturday Show's Wicked Witch, she has no one to blame but herself.

After all, she is a co-author of the plot. Each Monday night she and Darryl Boyd — alias Danny O'Dibble — collaborate on composing the storyline of TVQ-0's children's programme.

The following Saturday they present five five-minute segments of their joint saga, involving magic, fairies, potions, incantations, castles and Sherry Wheeler.

Story is all ad-libbed

Invariably, the Witch winds up at the gruesome end of a "custard" pie, fireman's hose, confetti storm or gravel pile.

Despite the battering it takes, Babs' face is unmarked and cheerful.

You wouldn't call her voluptuous; she's more the wiry type. But this is an advantage, considering the amount of physical buffeting witches have to take . . . at least, on a children's show.

The Saturday Show's story is probably the only dramatic offering presently on TV in which the principals have no script, no dialogue, no rehearsal. They are equipped merely with a rough idea of the plot and ad-lib round it.

Producer Joseph Ford is given the storyline draft on Tuesdays and has its contents typed up by the end of the week. This is for the benefit of the technical crew, not the actors.

This seemingly haphazard approach has the vital merit of working. And the team never underestimates its audience which, it realises, is far from being a pushover.

As Babs said: "The children take the plot seriously, but not us, perhaps. I'm always surprised to meet the kids after the show and find that they

bear me no animosity, despite everything I've tried to do to the goodies.

"In fact, children of about eight offer me kindly advice. They say, for example: 'If you didn't do those nasty things people would like to be friendly with you, you know.'

"Well, I mean, it's a bit galling when you go full blast to be THRUSH, KAOS, SPECTRE and the Demon King, all rolled into one."

The writing team of Wheelton and Boyd (possibly because of the unusual nature of its task) adopts an unorthodox method of composition. The couple think up slapstick routines and build a plot round them.

Boyd said: "We're both Goon fans and we carry on like Goons when we write the plot.

"Sometimes we walk up and down waiting for something to occur, or we sit there looking at each other."

Babs said: "Darryl gets most of the ideas. He may think of a situation where I may fall on my face in the gravel or be blown up or dropped on the concrete, and pretty soon we have a storyline.

"I have to be punished, you see, because I'm always trying to lure Sherry and Danny into unpleasant situations.

Never lose dignity

"I'm always seeking ways to make their lives a misery and triumph over them and make Danny look silly. We never make Sherry lose her dignity, by the way."

An example of the bitter rice the Witch had to savour was the Friendship Pill. When this idea germinated it grew into a full-length rigmarole that had the Witch planting the pill in the ground in the hope that a Friend would pop out of the soil.

Actor Neil McLucas played the friend, but as soon as he spotted Sherry he dumped the humiliated Witch hard on

her, hustle. Cheers from the audience and another brace of bruises for Babs.

"Of course," said mother-of-four Babs earnestly, "the Witch is spiteful, avaricious, scheming, vindictive, selfish, domineering, vain and always tries to run the show. She's

everything children dislike in adults."

Sherry and Danny, on the other hand, represent all the virtues wish-fulfillment adults possess. And that's the way co-author Babs Wheelton wants it . . . despite the physical penalties.

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