

How an teenager biggest

People use to poke fun at Linda Agran. Then she turned the tables...



**The
Caroline
Phillips**

Interview

Linda Agran
TV PRODUCER

LINDA AGRAN, once dubbed the most powerful and loudest woman in television, could overcome the noise on a building site with her voice. So I move from sitting opposite her to huddle beside her, and still she'd be heard above a pneumatic drill. But then, this is the feisty woman whose behaviour was so disruptive she was expelled from school at 14, didn't marry until the age of 44, and became the prime mover behind many of the best drama series of the past two decades.

Agran's commissions include *Minder*, *Widows*, *Paradise Postponed*, London's *Burning*, *Poirot* and the soon-to-hit-your-screens *Vanishing Man* series with Neil Morrissey and the *Pepys Diary* with Kenneth Branagh.

Now co-owner of ABTV, one of London's most successful production companies, she is presenting Carlton's *The Restaurant Show*, in which amateur foodies and professional critics eat and review their way through Britain's restaurants.

Agran hasn't been in front of camera since presenting *Behind The Headlines* and *Right To Reply*, wearing hair so bushy that it filled the screen. "This time," laughs 50-year-old Agran, "I'll be looking like a Spice Girl."

Agran has hair fluffed up just so, faultless make-up, lobe-sized diamond earrings and going-out-for-lunch-with-an-American-producer-style clothes, i.e. beige Armani accessorised with her pooch, a West Highland terrier.

She speaks in clearly enunciated, elongated vowels ("Being 50 is ab-so-lutely brilliant"), takes HRT enthusiastically, but wouldn't consider plastic surgery.

Agran's address book reads like a celebrity directory. Once John Mortimer nurtured Agran's ambition to become a barrister, offering to let her join his chambers. "Don't worry about the exams," he said. "Nobody will know."

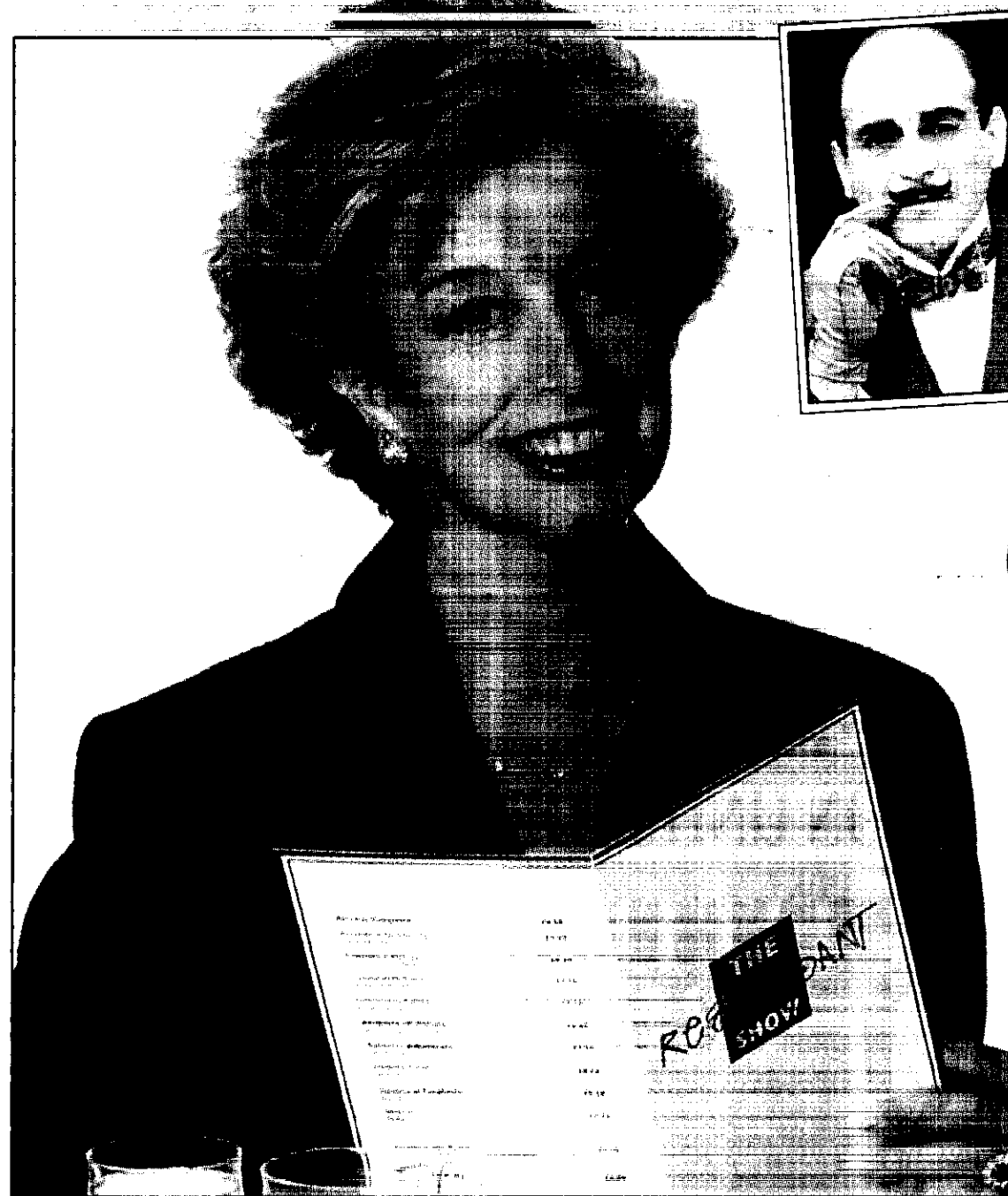
One of her best friends is Maureen Lipman. "I think we met through Jack (Rosenthal, Lipman's husband) or in a kosher butcher's. Jack once said that working with me and living with her was perfect because there was a seamless nag," she quips. "We're so close we don't even need to speak to communicate. We do everything together, we even had our hysterectomies on the same day."

IS BEING Jewish important to her? "I like being a member of a minority. I love the idea that people might one day turn on me," she replies, laughing. "But I wasn't brought up with the faith."

Agran started her career typing in a theatrical agency, hoping to marry a movie star. Instead, she met David Niven junior in the reception area, joined the William Morris agency as his number two, followed him to produce at Columbia films and walked out when he did.

Then they bought the rights to Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now* and secured Paramount backing and

expelled, overeating became one of the noises in television



SUCCESS: Linda on *The Restaurant Show*, left. She produced *Minder* starring George Cole, above, and *Poirot* (David Suchet)

"Oooh no, dear," she squawks. "But I don't think I'd really matured enough to be in a grown-up relationship without dependency and needing to please until my 40s."

She had toyed with the idea of having children with Sandy. "To be honest, I don't think I could have coped with another me." She coughs defensively.

Agran is clever, funny, gracious and not threatened by other women. It is possible to see her life as the struggle of a misfit with low self-esteem. "Most of my life," she admits, "I've tried to prove that I'm not stupid and that I'm of value."

BUT she suffers still from anxiety. "I used to wake up worrying," she says. "Now I worry less but still cope badly with stress. I take sleeping pills most nights then lie awake wondering whether I'm an addict! Next thing, the birds are tweeting."

Four years ago, she contracted Epstein Barr virus ("the same as the Duchess of Kent") which turned into ME. "Sometimes I have to leave work and go to bed. In the morning I'd get up, walk the dogs and come back dripping with sweat, feeling I'd been hit by a truck. But I'm getting better now."

Agran intends to retire to the country in two years' time, to become a wacky old lady surrounded by animals. And will she speak still in a voice loud enough to subdue a concrete mixer?

Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland as stars. The film was a hit and the Niven/Agran duo moved to Paramount. She left to become head of scripts at Warner Brothers, then joined Euston Films (Thames TV's film arm) as head of development/executive producer. At Thames she produced *Minder* and *Widows*, Lynda "Prime Suspect" La Plante's first work.

Agran was fired when a "new man" joined the company. She "sat at home crying" until John Birt, then head of LWT, employed her. But "as a woman" she knew she'd never make the top, so left in 1989 to set up her own company.

Her salary eight years ago was "£100,000-ish". "I was taught by David

Niven senior to buy today what I'll be able to afford in three years." Once she bought a £5,000 painting to snub the imperious assistant who'd implied that she couldn't afford it.

Agran, the second of three children, was raised in Hertfordshire. Her father was director of a packaging company, her mother was a housewife and her brothers were breezily successful. As the only girl in a Jewish family, Agran's responsibility was to hook a husband. "It's difficult," she says, "when you're expected to be chosen and attractive."

At puberty she weighed 15 stone and rarely took off her coat. "I'd raid the fridge in the middle of the night

and eat everything," she says. Agran was also deemed stupid at grammar school. "I knew I wasn't but I was having enormous difficulty being understood. I became disruptive, seeing no other way of getting noticed. I was constantly being told I was a disaster."

EXPELLED from school aged 14, Agran was sent to a commercial college, where she was "considered a genius". Romantically, she considered herself a flop. For years, she'd accompany a girlfriend to weekly dances, but nobody ever asked Agran to dance.

She didn't have a boyfriend until she was 18. "Sex is an important part of life but I don't

believe it has any value on its own except to relieve tension. I'm a great believer in a regular supply of batteries."

Her relationships were "mainly long-term ones with writers". Then, in 1986, she met Sandy, chairman of an advertising company, on a blind date. "He was terrified of me and refused to talk to me all evening." Sandy was already married. "Maybe I'm consoling myself," says Agran, "but I don't believe you can wreck a marriage that is solid."

They began seeing one another and, six years later, when Agran was 44 and having the premed for her hysterectomy, they decided to marry. Was this her first-ever proposal?