

opinion

GUEST COLUMNIST - HELEN LEDERER

I was so excited, I almost hugged Ann Widdecombe



Just over a year ago, I would think nothing of zipping into town for a meeting (otherwise known as an "audition") or schlepping up five escalators to find customer services to get myself a credit note. The volume of entries in my Filofax could make me feel frantic. And then the urgency of lockdown made me take stock.

Never before had I watched so many documentaries or drunk so much gin on the same cushions for so long. They need plumping up every morning to look decent - I wish that was how it worked for me.

Yet, being faced with the same coffee mugs for months on end and observing oneself disengage from accessorising takes its toll. It has to be a sorry day when one asks oneself, "Who needs shoes when one has slippers?" or "What use is a handbag?"

And then, around the 491st day, earlier this month, I went out. Twice. First, for a hairdressing experience, which wasn't quite as I remembered. It may have been that my new lockdown "wash and leave" system had made me cocky, but I started to question the point of a tonging when a scrunchie could offer the "undone look" for free. On the other hand, I was pleased to support the economy. Nor did I want to fall out with anyone, in case they refused to do my roots, which, as most almost natural blondes will know, can affect one's sense of wellbeing.

The second outing was to an event. A free one. Call me flighty, but as soon as I saw the words "red" and "carpet", I knew I had to say yes. Instead of standing up and sneaking a sherry with one other person, in a park, I could



AMBER BURROWS

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now be sitting at a table with several other people at once. And if handing out an award for best performance at the National Film Awards would get me off the flattened sofa, and a reason to squeeze into the Spanx, I was in.

And it was awesome. My companion and I decided to open the bottle provided on the table as soon as we arrived, if only to show respect to the kind sponsor. By now, we were high with the adrenaline rush of at least two people saying hello to us at the door. A few tables away was Ann Widdecombe. I was so excited to see someone familiar that wasn't the postman, I wanted to hug her. And anyway, hadn't I seen

her on *Strictly*? That made us, at the very least, post-lockdown confidantes for the duration of the evening. I only just stopped myself from going over and initiating a conversation. Any conversation was a change.

But then our fellow table guests arrived. One fellow table neighbour turned out to be none other than Bill Bailey with his very interesting wife Kris, who happened to be carrying a small bag that looked like a dog. By now I was beside myself. Humans! With accessories! Not only that, here were humans who were also funny and empathic. I didn't know what to do with myself, I was so happy. Glasses were

chinked, conversations gushed out of previously quietened mouths and the joy of interruptions and talking over each other was celebrated, especially after so long. There was also a lot of nodding from me.

I was reminded of the title of a self-help book in the 80s called *Women Who Love Too Much*. I was that person. I clung to connections and overlaps and people and love, and even though I'd been drowning in my own dressing gown of morbid self-reflection days before, while reliving all the mistakes I'd made in a career of mishaps, I was now basking in a circle of instant sociability and light.

The final couple arrived. Mathew Horne even remembered a job we had done together. This was the icing on the cake for me. I had now been verbally reminded that I had done a job once, and even better, I was sharing this memory with another person who was able to remember it as well. This is what conversations used to be like. I remembered now. Small talk became big talk.

By now, somewhere in the back of my mind, I was thinking that a group mobile home or touring caravan holiday for all six of us would be very doable, if not imminent. Maybe the Scilly Isles would suit?

As it happened, we exchanged numbers and disappeared into the night, having been touched by the warm glow of speaking a lot, shouting a bit, interrupting occasionally, and laughing. This was group therapy at its best. Although no plans thus far, for the group caravan side of things...

@HelenLederer

This week I have been...

Watching...

I have totally been engaged with the thriller *Lie with Me* (right) on Channel 5, not least because it went out on consecutive nights, and I couldn't cheat by gorging all at once. The Australian house in the TV programme was definitely house porn for those of us fed up with our own cupboards. In fact, the dark grey-painted wooden shelving made me sick with envy, and no clutter to be seen. Even better, the glorious silk shirt waisters and grey leisure pants



worn by beautiful actors allowed the viewer to focus on the best of Australian fashion alongside the psychological conundrum of who and how and why.

Packing...

I am discovering the joys of cardboard and old-fashioned masking tape as I pack up the books longlisted for Comedy Women in Print 2021, the literary prize I set up to recognise, celebrate and encourage witty women authors. I'm packing the books into what I hope will be a neat symmetrical arrangement for the judges. I bought a job lot of chocolate bars to go with the books - 20, in fact, which means I get to eat the extra eight with

impunity. My normal angst about bigging up witty books and the whole "what is witty anyway?" question prevails, and causes me sleepless nights. One person's hilarity will be another's indifference (or fury). But I found this definition which could be handy: wit is "using words and ideas in a quick and inventive way to create humour". In other words, talk fast. My fail-safe definition of humour is someone falling over and then pretending they hadn't. But is this witty? Maybe if they do it quickly...

Chewing...

I've started nibbling my nails again. Such an embarrassing middle-aged habit to admit to, but there we are. At least I don't belch. It's a sure sign that as some lockdown strictures desist, some fingers have found their way into places they shouldn't. Is it back to the acrylics again? Please no...

Helen Lederer is founder of the Comedy Women in Print Prize. Visit comedywomeninprint.co.uk for this year's longlist