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How a maestro did it: Michael Parkinson and the lost art of conversation

When did you last watch an interesting chat show on television? They were all the rage in the 1970's, when middle-aged men, appeared genie-like in a fog of clouds, clutching a tumbler of whisky and chain smoking Players No.6, whilst interrogating the TV flavour of the month or latest West End star.

I don't recall a woman taking lead interviewer role, but there was never a shortage of desperate attempts to engage the occasional bad-tempered London diva or an American comedienne.

Parky, as he was affectionately known, who died this week in his late 80's, was the opposite of a classic BBC interviewer.

He had no university education; he lacked any kind of pretensions to be anything other than the "bluff Yorkshireman" he was, who made no concessions to the BBC's preference for clipped Received Pronunciation and the need to be slightly superior to your audience. Possibly as a result, he enjoyed a 4-decade career and never lost his popularity.

So what is the art of conversation? Is it really a "lost art"?

I think most people would agree the ideal is a 2-way street, and for now I'll rule out the likelihood of the participation in any satisfactory and productive discussion with one of our AI friends (I'm tempted to start to refer to the bots as "servants", but I fear this might be a step too far for the time being).

So first of all, it is a balancing act. There are evident transgressions in a bad conversation:

- anything imbalanced when it comes to taking up time. Never forget that you're not that particularly interesting.
- context and perspective are vital. Paying attention is advisable. Boring people is not.

This is not really much to go on, is it? I have

checked out "Psychology Latest", and it informs me a good conversation is not unstructured.

In fact, it is a complex act, which takes some time to master. It is also, of course, a necessary ingredient of diplomacy and effective leadership, so you'd better get it right.

But how did people like Parky, or the occasional terrific conversationalists you may know make conversation be compelling enough to attract audiences?

Is it some kind of supernatural telepathy that good conversation can convey? Do the chat show hosts (if any are left other than late-night Saturday garble, which is all I ever see available on terrestrial British TV)?

The Americans still make a decent fist of it, but they are frequently politically too affiliated and Jimmy Fallon, John Stewart, Conan O'Brian and Oprah don't seem to have the lasting "national institution" status that Parky indisputably achieved and maintained.

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I would argue that displaying a sense of humour and self-deprecation helps. Parky was once notoriously attacked by a puppet emu controlled by its owner who used a fake arm to lure his guests into being pecked into oblivion, possibly on live TV.

It was innocent and very funny and most people of my generation remember it.

Of course, it didn't always work. There will always be a recalcitrant guest whose agent has forced this on them or has just had a bad flight.

He also suffered from the nightmare of a hopelessly drunk guest, at least on one occasion. Parky was prepared to share what he considered his rather uncomfortable

moments, with no real judgment other than in fact, an excruciating interview can subsequently be amusing.

But all hail to Parky, he was never resentful, and if he ever bore a grudge, he kept it to himself.

Let's get out more and "chat" more. It's a fun discipline and it relieves the boredom of the narcissistic self-important, "influencers" of the Tik Tok brigade.

Nice talking to you.