

Features

Can daytime TV cope with the Loose Woman in me?

She wore the wrong dress and put her foot on the table, but Judith Woods survived a nerve-racking day on the ITV talk show

I'd like to begin this account of my debut on live television with a heartfelt apology. Not just for putting my leg on the table (it was in context; still, what was I thinking?) but for all those times I've sat at home and muttered the following shameful words.

To wit: "I know that woman on screen is a highly competent news or weather or light entertainment professional and I ought to be keenly listening to what she's saying, but what on earth is she wearing?"

Because, actually, choosing a frock or a jacket or even a statement necklace for daytime telly is a trauma. A trauma, I tell you!

For, after a decade sitting on the sofa shouting at the TV, I had been given the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pit my wits against the queens of daytime television – the ladies of *Loose Women*.

The brief from the programme-makers I would be joining for a day informed me I should "dress for lunch with the ladies, so smart/casual". Well, for a communal scamper to Pret à Manger I'd put on a coat. Possibly. Who, these days, has time for any more?

Loose Women, that's who. So, I bought a Jigsaw frock in the sale, black with a lace collar. It looked pleasingly Audrey Hepburn in the fitting room, but turned out to be *The Wrong Dress Entirely*, as I discovered after I'd come off air (more of which later). Well, technically I was never on air: my bit was filmed "as live", which is to say in front of a studio audience, but not the nation.

At this point I should point out that my broadcasting record is, at best, lacklustre. Many years ago, I was a reporter on a BBC2 kids' consumer show called *Short Change*, which won a BAFTA, transferred to BBC1 and then, ahem, "let me go" as it was "going in a different direction" (for which read: "cooler").

Then there was the radio breakfast show in Scotland, where the chemistry between my co-host and me turned out to be nuclear fission rather than fusion. When I observed, on air, that he was "a bloated tick on the belly of broadcasting", he responded, "Shut up, you silly cow," and unplugged my microphone. Fair enough, really.

Since then, I've steered clear of live broadcasting – apart from *Woman's Hour*, which you can do in your onesie if you need to. So the prospect of glamping up for daytime telly was a daunting one.

ITV's *Loose Women*, screened every weekday at 12.30pm, has around a million loyal viewers who tune in to see its panel – drawn from a pool of women with lots of life experience and the attitude to match, plus a celebrity guest or two – discuss the serious, frivolous and thought-provoking issues of the day.

When I was at home with each of my young children, I watched the show avidly: it was like having lunch with sparky friends without having to leave the sofa. The idea, then, of appearing on the programme was slightly surreal and nerve-wracking.

When I arrive at the studios on London's South Bank, I find that, pleasingly, I have been allocated my own dressing room. Sadly, I have not been provided with Krug, white orchids or any of the other items on my backstage rider. But it is nice to have my own loo.

The editor, Emily Humphries, comes to tell me what "my" panel (I am joining columnist Jane Moore, pop singer/presenter Jamelia, Nolan sister Coleen and, chairing it all, Kaye Adams) will be talking about. The subject is the "toxic effect of stress on school-age children" and ties in with a report published that day by the charity Young Minds.

It's an interesting topic, and I almost have time to think about it



Judith Woods, centre, with Coleen Nolan and Jamelia. Below: on set and in hair and make-up. 'You needed more warmth; at times you were a little bit clipped,' Judith was told



“*I unwind a little too far, and lever my three-and-a-halves on to the table to show my heels*”

before I am ushered off to hair and make-up, past wardrobe: densely packed rails of dresses, jackets and tops running the gamut from chic to trendy to spangly. I rifle through them hastily. None is black.

Make-up turns out to be a spray-painter that showers my face with a billion tiny droplets in shades of beige. "Everyone wears this sort of make-up on television," asserts the make-up artist. "Even the men." As if to prove her point, in strolls one of the special guests, the BBC's *National Lottery* lynchpin Nick Knowles, inquiring after his own paint-job.

My hair is pinned and sprayed and tweaked and flattened and flattened some more. This, apparently, makes me telly-ready, but I realise, with a jolt of dismay, that I look like the complete opposite of a Loose

Woman. I look, truth be told, like a slightly severe French schoolmistress.

But it is *trop tard* to do anything about it. The real show has started and is running like clockwork, segueing from serious to light-hearted and back again. Then comes my big moment. I am ushered behind the set, my stomach churning like a washer-dryer; I'm introduced, and then I walk on to the studio floor.

What happened after that? I have blanked it. I know I didn't faint or swear or cry, but that's about it. "Just relax," I'd been told. "Forget that this is your first time. Forget that an audience of 100 people is sitting a few feet away. Forget the cameras."

Easy to say – and, in truth, frighteningly easy to do. In fact, my fellow panellists are so engaging and

welcoming and generally charming that my main problem is remembering the cameras, rather than forgetting them.

Although at first I am rather guarded and staccato (we journalists are always on the lookout for trick questions), I unwind slightly when we speak about Emma Thompson wearing flatties to a red carpet event (the equivalent of pitching up in Helmand without a flak jacket).

Talk turns to our own footwear, whereupon I unwind a little too far and lever my three-and-a-halves on to the table to show that my heels, while subtly hinting at S&M, aren't nearly as formidable as Jamelia's.

Inwardly I curse the seductive girls-together-having-a-blether intimacy of daytime telly. But I soldier on; we talk about stresses on children, and maybe other things too, but I am too busy listening to the other women to pay much attention to what I am saying.

And then, suddenly (well, 15 minutes later) it is over. I pick up my personalised *Loose Women* mug, beam like a schoolgirl as my fellow panellists assure me I am "a natural", and trot off to be debriefed by none other than ITV's director of daytime, Helen Warner.

After the statutory "very brave"s, I cut to the chase and ask for the sort of (constructive) criticism

she might give after the show proper. "Coleen brings genuine warmth to the panel, Kaye is a bit of a Leftie, but not quite as prim and proper as she might seem at first," says Warner. "Jane is more on the Right of the political spectrum and can respond to anything with fully formed, quick-fire opinions. Jamelia is younger, but not at all intimidated and she's got a lot to say for herself."

But what about the New Girl?

"You were much more natural than I would have expected for someone who's never done it before," she says. "But you needed more warmth; at times you were a little bit clipped, and sharp one-liners are not what *Loose Women* is about. You don't want the audience to think you are a bit irritated or have something better to do."

And my dress? "Black is a big no-no. While the dress is spot-on, the colour makes you seem aloof. But, overall, you did really well."

As I rise to leave, I turn: "So I won't call you, you'll call me?"

"Yes," she affirms. "I'll call you."

Admittedly, she doesn't say when. Or even why. But my mug is washed and ready to take back on set again. And I've bought a much friendlier new frock.

'Loose Women' broadcasts on ITV, weekdays at 12.30pm