

'I went in search of criminals'

Lynda La Plante was still an actress when her first TV script, *Widows*, became a huge hit – and it still has a special place in her heart



The Widows cast: Top row from left: Maureen O'Farrell, Ann Mitchell, director Ian Toynton, Fiona Hendley and Eva Mottley. Bottom row: Lynda La Plante and producer Linda Agran

I always smile when I see this picture of me with the director and as-yet unknown cast of my new TV show, *Widows*.

When I wrote the script back in the 80s, I was still an actress, and always up for parts that Felicity Kendal seemed to have turned down! At that time I was in a show that was so bad I told the script editor I wouldn't mind having a go at writing myself. He said, 'Please do – just send in your idea to me, but make it brief.'

So I went home, got out my typewriter and wrote three story ideas. Two got rejected, but one didn't: *Widows*. Somebody had scrawled across it, 'This is brilliant.'

Although I'd had the idea, I didn't know anything about police or criminals, so I went in search of them. I went to prisons, met prisoners' wives, and visited Holloway Prison. I found my *Widows* ringleader Dolly Rawlins, and then the rest of the characters followed. For my villain, I arranged to meet a notorious man who I'd met on set before. He took me to a pub where I soon learnt not to take out a tape recorder or write

notes because people quickly clam up. That's where my acting training came in useful – I memorised what he said, then ran home and scribbled it all down. It was a fascinating, wonderful time of my life, and I enjoyed writing so much that I never went back to acting.

I was involved in every aspect of production – the casting, set and costumes. I told them, 'Dolly will dress in Jaeger – she has class and likes cashmere. Just because she has an East End accent, it doesn't mean she wears

Crimplene.' I knew who Dolly Rawlins was because I'd met a woman like her.

Our producer Verity Lambert was the person who turned the light on in my head and made everything possible. She

was a consummate professional, but also a brilliant editor. She didn't tell me what to write or what to change – she just made me realise my mistake and I went and sorted it out. I owe my career to her.

I look back at that time with such fond memories – the big hair (although to be honest, mine is still like that) – and the questionable fashion. Most of all, I feel

'People were running home to watch the robbery'

nostalgic about how programmes were made. Today it's such a long, drawn-out process. Back then people would just get on with it. If anyone told Verity she couldn't have four unknown women in the show she'd say 'Yes you can'.

And she was right, of course. When it got to episode five of *Widows* in April 1983, people were actually running home to watch it because it was the night of the robbery. It took a while to sink in that we were on to a hit.

I came back with an even bigger series, *Prime Suspect*, in 1991. But I certainly had a lot of rejection along the way.

Widows holds a very special place in my heart. Even in my new book, *Buried*, there are threads that go back to it – I think it will always be with me.

❖ *Buried* by Lynda La Plante is out now (£14.99, Zaffre)

