

The Interview with ... Stewart Lee

*Stewart Lee is a British comedian, writer, actor and theatre director responsible for some of the most original and brilliant comedy shows on British television in the last 15 years. He first rose to prominence in the self-written BBC2 comedy shows *Fist of Fun* and *This Morning with Richard not Judy*. After becoming the focus of a hate campaign by evangelical Christians for his role in creating *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (first produced in 2003), he returned to his first love: stand-up comedy. Three astonishing DVD releases of his solo work later, the BBC offered him 6 episodes of his own stand-up show, *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, which aired on BBC2 in March this year. Ricky Gervais has described him as "the cleverest, funniest, most cliché-free comedian on the circuit", a fitting description of a man who works hard to explore the artistic limits of the form. 90s Comedian, his 2005 show, is simply one of the most daring defences of free speech to emerge from a country with a history of them. Just back from a successful but controversial run at the Edinburgh festival, he kindly agreed to answer some questions for *The Angler*.*

Stewart Lee, you've recently been the focus of controversy after the Daily Mail picked up on some comments you make about the Top Gear presenter Richard 'The Hamster' Hammond in your new show, *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*. In the show you wish that Hammond had died a graphic and painful death in the car crash he suffered in 2006. Is the Mail's reaction a case of political correctness going mad?



"Well, oddly, the piece was actually about the worry that right-leaning comics and journalists are able to bash soft targets like homosexuals, lesbians, immigrants, prostitutes etc as much as they like with as much ferocity as they like, as long as they say 'it's a joke' when questioned about it by 'the politically correct brigade', as they dismiss all their opponents. So, in the course of a 35 minute bit I gradually eased around to applying this logic to one of their own, and this was wilfully decontextualised by the Daily Mail."

The new controversy follows on from the well-publicised hate campaign against you carried out by Christian Voice (55,000 letters of complaint to the BBC about their decision to screen the musical; vast exaggerations of the number of profanities used in the tabloids) after you wrote and directed Jerry Springer: The Opera in 2000, a musical which featured Jesus on a talk show in hell. Have you ever deliberately courted the outrage of idiots, or are you just lucky that way?

"I co-wrote the libretto of, and directed, *JSTO*. We never saw the controversy coming as it was, again, largely fabricated by people on the far right with their own agenda, irrespective of the actual content of the show. Costs and closures as a result of this meant we never received royalties and the show never broke even and

we never really made any money. So, I supposed I am just lucky like that.

"Although I appreciate it is necessary to publicise your work, I also sometimes feel I don't really want that many people to know about it, so I am at least able to carry on making some kind of a living rather than just being banned."

Your own status as the '41st Best Stand Up Ever' (confirmed by a Channel 4 poll) and your decennial return to fashion have provided a recurring theme in your shows. Do you ever feel frustrated by the fact that

a large proportion of the public's ignorance of, or active hostility to, irony, which you make generous use of, means that there is effectively a glass ceiling to your popularity?

"I have accepted the glass ceiling as an irremovable barrier and am trying to do as well as I can below it. On the other hand, most people I know who have become very successful in comedy have turned into dicks, apart from Harry Hill, and their lives are scrutinised and ruined. I can still move around all the places I normally go without much trouble, and yet the BBC2 money means we can now get a mortgage on a house in London with a room for our son, and a spare room for Granny, so it is ideal really.

"Also, as all my stuff is from the position of an outsider looking in, I don't really know how I would continue to function if I was accepted as a mainstream comic. The money would be nice, but the artistic freedom and a bit of money are a nice combination. I expect to shake off a few stragglers with this new tour."

In your show '41st Best Stand Up Ever' you do a routine about television's inability to deal with serious subjects, and to support your point you 'quote' the comedian Russell Brand's response to the



British Big Brother racism scandal. Is there a school of comedy ethics which allows you to attribute fabricated quotes to fellow comedians, and did you ever get into trouble for calling the British Queen "a bit of a smelly skank, all things considered"?

"I did make up the Russell Brand quote, but it was the kind of thing he says, and now he's a personality rather than a comic I think he's fair game. Did I really call the queen that?"

No, you didn't. It was meant to be a joke using your own diabolical methods against you, but now it has backfired. It's not even the kind of thing you would say. Sorry.

Moving on: I've seen you live in the flesh on two occasions: once, at the Glastonbury festival (2005) in front of a mixed public, and for the second time at the Soho Theatre in London in front of a crowd who were there solely for you. There were marked differences in your onstage persona each time. At the festival you were static, witheringly sardonic, hunched and ruthless in front of people who might not have known who you were, while in front of your fans you appeared almost friendly and went much further with the theatrical elements of your performance. Are these differences planned or spontaneous, and is there a secret pleasure to be had in playing before an indifferent or hostile audience?

"It's inevitable that I feel defensive in front of strangers, who I am not expecting to like me. I have tried to sculpt a sympathetic audience and I am slightly worried that a degree of TV exposure might bring in the merely curious to live shows and mean they won't be as much fun."

The defensiveness wasn't a bad thing. It was actually very exciting to see you perform challenging material to people who might take it the wrong way.

The Dutch comedian Hans Teeuwen stopped performing his cabaret shows in his native language in 2005 because he was tired and no longer found the work challenging, and developed a show in English which has been well-received. What do you think of Teeuwen and have you ever been tempted to try and work in another language because doing your job well in English is almost laughably easy for you?

"I think Hans is an inspiration. I haven't tried to do stand-up in another language as I am English and lazy. But I do try to make each show more difficult for myself that the last, to keep myself awake and suffering. 2005's 90s Comedian had the half hour Jesus routine. 2007's 41st Best had a degree of sentimentality and feeling, which was a new thing to do on stage. This year I am singing a country and western song as well as I possibly can."

The BBC finally reneged on its policy of only commissioning bad comedy when they screened six episodes of Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle earlier this year. How has the aftermath of the exposure been and are there any plans for a second series?

"They were supposed to tell me in June if there was a second series. The official line is 'It's not "No"', and I will be told in January 2010. I think it was amazing to be on at all. I don't know what difference it will have made yet. It's too early to say."

My wife and I are expecting our first child in the next couple of weeks. How has fatherhood been for you so far, and do you, as a celebrity father, have any advice for prospective fathers among Leiden University's English student population?

"I am hardly a celebrity! Fatherhood has been brilliant, every day is a new adventure. But we are both shattered and it is hard to juggle work around. Also, I think that caring for a little boy, and loving him unconditionally, has made me more sympathetic to people's suffering, and this is slowly changing the tone of my stand-up."

Finally, have you ever visited the Netherlands and do you have any plans to perform here in the near future?

"I have been to Amsterdam, in 1993, where I loved the art galleries and pornography, but I haven't any concrete plans to come at the moment. I need to concentrate on the achievable goal of doing well here to provide for my family before I go out of fashion again (2011/12). I will come to the Netherlands after that with relish."

Thanks a lot for taking the time to answer the questions. It's a real pleasure to continue seeing your work on DVD and (finally) television. Here's hoping you get that second series.

by Peter Crowe



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