

Mayall direct 11

He made farting funny and took the wind out of the Tories. But what lurks behind the anarchy and arsing around? **Philip Watson** gets to the bottom of Rik Mayall

It's a cold, crisp, early spring morning in Bury and Rik Mayall isn't wearing any trousers. Filming *Dancing Queen*, the third in a trilogy of one-hour comedy dramas to be shown this month, he is pacing around the ticket hall of a railway station, trying to keep warm. Apart from his lower half, he is dressed impeccably in a dinner suit as Neil, an upper-class twit who finds himself stranded after a stag-night prank. On the director's cue, he crosses to the station office to buy a ticket back to London, changes his mind, and walks slowly out of the station into the bright sunshine. A small crowd of mothers and schoolchildren has gathered outside to watch the filming and, still trouserless, he begins to sign autographs. As one of the kids scurries away clutching his prize, he says: "He's great, that Rik Mayall. Dead funny."

The atmosphere on location seems much the same. It's true that Mayall is taking a risk with these films, if only because they demand the ability to create characters more believable and rounded than he has achieved on television before. Collectively entitled *Rik Mayall Presents*, he is more exposed than usual. And he is in the company of genuine acting talent – Amanda Donohoe, Eleanor Bron, Alan Cumming, Peter Capaldi, Michael Maloney and, in the romantic comedy shooting today, Helena Bonham Carter, who plays a northern working-class stripper. Yet as you might expect from a man with a gift for making people laugh, on set Mayall seems relaxed, open, on form.

Away from it, he is suspicious and evasive. When we

HAIR AND GROOMING: MARTIN PRETORIUS FOR MICHAEL JOHN; FOR CLOTHING DETAILS SEE STYLEFILE



first meet, he insists on going for a walk, talking mid-step, unsettling me, dancing around me on Platform 3. He delivers his sentences with his usual good timing, but slowly, deliberately, with a touch of the menace he can bring to his roles. "I'm a difficult person to interview," he warns. "Everything I have to say is in my performance. I don't like to give too much away."

Later, however, when a very cautious interview begins between takes, it is clear he enjoys and feeds off the energy of giving two separate performances: one to camera, the other into the tape recorder. "I've got to go, but I'll think about that one," he says when he is called, or "Nasty question! I'll be back." At one point, he continues an answer while remaining upside-down, spread-eagled on a British Rail trolley, his feet over the handlebar. "These three films are anecdotes about mistakes or jokes gone wrong," he says, clearly enjoying the absurdity of the situation. "But they are also about loneliness. When I think about it, all of my characters, especially the ones I've created myself, are about loneliness or an inability to communicate." Then he is off, the trolley wheeled down the walkway and back to the camera by fellow actors Nathaniel Parker and Martin Clunes. "Take Alan B'Stard..." he calls out, giggling, as his voice trails off into the distance.

A week later, being interviewed in London's Groucho Club, Mayall remains on the move. Edgy and hyperactive, he is a nucleus of nervous energy. Parts of his body seem to have a life of their own; his movements are involuntary and unruly. He can only stay caged and chairbound for a few minutes before he is up pacing the room, gesticulating, projecting, performing. His hands flap awkwardly, flying continually from his pockets to his head to, characteristically, a position just behind his hips. Even when seated, the rest of his body refuses to relax. He crosses and uncrosses his legs incessantly. He shuffles around in his chair. He will fidget and flay about to adopt an air that is at first extrovert and frenetic, then, with two fingers pressed to his temple, thoughtful and sincere.

And if his body does reach some approximation of stillness, Mayall's face gives him away every time. Ever expressive and mobile, it is full of frowns, smirks, boyish giggles and leers. The total effect is that of a shark: if Rik Mayall stops moving, he dies.

While this supercharged electricity is to be expected, everything else comes as a surprise. For a comic actor who has made a virtue out of being barking and stentorian, in person he is quiet and thoughtful. Though his quick-fire range of gestures and accents invite laughter, and he is appealingly witty, he is the first to admit that he lacks the natural gift for comedy that, say, Robbie Coltrane or Ben Elton possess. "Much of my comedy is performance or character-led, not gag-led," he says, almost apologetically. "It's always a disappointment to people who meet me for the first time



“Rik is very handsome
and could knob
anyone he wanted to”





A right clever Rik: clockwise from above, with Helena Bonham Carter in *Rik Mayall Presents. As a Young One*. With Phoebe Cates in *Drop Dead Fred*. Mayall and Ade Edmondson share some bum jokes in *Bottom*



that I'm not as funny as they expected."

If there seems little outright comedy in his real life, there is also little tragedy. Not for Rik Mayall the complexities, insecurities and occasional paranoia of some of his contemporaries. Not the childhood kleptomania and celebrated celibacy of Stephen Fry. Nor the debilitating self-doubts and cautiousness of Hugh Laurie. And although he has been compared (inappropriately) to Tony Hancock, there are certainly not the flickers of dark insanity that have unhinged comedians such as Spike Milligan and Harry H Corbett. Rik Mayall, resolutely, does not display any neuroses, any tears.

"What does he have to be worried about?" asks Maurice Gran, who is the co-writer of *The New Statesman*. "He is extremely handsome, he has a lovely family, and he could knob anyone he wanted."

In fact, what Mayall is at pains to stress is not just his normality, but his ordinariness. This is disingenuous, of course, and a well-worn celebrity gambit, but Mayall does it more convincingly than most. He'll tell you he's taken the tube to the interview rather than ride in the car that was offered to him. He talks fondly, if guardedly, of his family life at home in Shepherd's Bush with Barbara, his wife, and his two children – Rosemary, six, and Sidney, four. And pacing around the room in a navy blue suit and sensible brogues, he certainly looks ordinary. If you can put to one side the farty childishness and extraordinary lunacy that he brings to many of his roles, he can look disarmingly like a second-rate adman with his top button undone and M&S tie at half-mast. It's just that this adman is trying to sell you Rik Mayall, "an ordinary bloke who happens to act".

"I'm very defensive because I want to keep my life ordinary," he says. "That's a very important word in my life – ordinary. My ordinary upbringing, my ordinary family life. I have a yearning for excitement, which is satisfied by my job, but I also have a yearning to be ordinary."

Even his friends and colleagues emphasise it, unprompted, as one of the first things to note about him. "I thought, as a comic, he would be exhausting and completely off the wall," says Helena Bonham Carter. "But he's just very, very straightforward and completely normal." Maurice Gran agrees, if reluctantly: "I'd much rather say he was nasty and depraved and does a lot of drugs paid for by gun-running. But he's just a well-brought-up, middle-class boy with good manners."

What Mayall is best at, though, is keeping himself hidden. Part of him is masked by a very actorly, showbizzy, self-consciousness. He is vain (but has the grace to admit it), and pleased with himself. For someone who confesses to being fascinated by the humour inherent in the human condition, he makes few jokes about himself. Rik Mayall is almost completely unself-deprecatory.

Part of his enigma is also explained by the fact that he rarely gives interviews, in order,

he says, to maintain the mystery and illusion of his comedy. "Interviews are really damaging to me," he says. "I don't want people to see me as I really am because the work loses half its power. If people know too much about me, they will be less surprised by the jokes."

He is also reluctant to appear on chat shows. Recently, for example, he declined an offer of £10,000 to be a guest on Jonathan Ross' *Saturday Zoo* with the excuse that he was "too busy". And unlike many of his contemporaries, he has refused to walk into the very open and lucrative arms of advertising. Not for him the high-profile joys of Persil, Mercury and the Alliance & Leicester. "I did do a commercial for a chocolate bar called 54321 when I first started, but I don't do them now," he says. "To be honest, it makes me feel a bit unclean. I feel I always need to be able to communicate immediately with an audience. If they see me telling a lie for money, I lose a lot of their trust."

Most of all, he remains hidden behind the panoply of paranoid, weak, lonely and nasty characters he has played. He has said his characters come from inside – that they are exorcisms of parts of his personality that he dislikes or feels insecure about. Kevin Turvey, the gormless Brummie investigative reporter from *A Kick up the Eighties*, was about "my fear of being very boring". Rick in *The Young Ones* was about "me being paranoid about being childishly selfish". Richie Rich in *Filthy Rich and Catflap* was about "acting out my obsession with myself and showbusiness". And Alan B'Stard in *The New Statesman* is "just a complete sneaky bastard".

It is tempting to see Mayall as B'Stard incarnate. He will admit to being unforgiving and "occasionally lethal if people fuck about with me". Certainly, during an early wild child period, he was seen to smash a glass over a man's head as a drunken party joke. And, most controversially, there are the tabloid tales of his messy break-up seven years ago with pregnant girlfriend and fellow *Young Ones* writer Lise Mayer. He will not discuss it, not even to put the record straight, but he has been criticised for the seemingly perfunctory way he left her to marry Barbara Robbin, also pregnant at the time.

But Rik Mayall is not quite the desperado that his characters and occasional miscreances might have you believe. "I don't know why I'm attracted to failed, horrible sociopaths. You could say that's what I'm really like, but with my hand on my heart, that's not true. You could say in order to socialise myself, I have to repress these nasty things in me, so they come out on stage. You could say, probably more accurately, that my style of performance is very revealing – you see the hidden secrets of my characters. It makes the audience think they're in the know."

In many ways his ability to play Ordinary Rik is a function of his stable upbringing. Born in the wonderfully named village Matching Tye, just outside Harlow in Essex, on March



“The critics
about Go

7, 1958, Mayall had a childhood that could not have been more conducive to an acting career. Both his parents were drama teachers who met at London's Central School of Speech and Drama. When Rik was three, the family moved to Droitwich and his father took up a lecturing post at the nearby Shenstone College, where he taught until he retired in 1980. (Rik has a two-year older brother, Anthony, and two younger sisters, Libby, 30, who works for a record company, and Kate, 25, who is studying for a PhD in psychology.)

Rik made his stage debut at the age of six playing an urchin in his father's production of Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* at the local theatre. "I had to put on raggedy old clothes and it didn't matter how messy I got – in fact the messier the better. I had to go on stage, open a dustbin, ruffle through the rubbish, find a bar of chocolate, eat it, get as much chocolate over my face as possible, show my face to the audience, and get a big laugh. And I just thought, this is paradise – this is what I want for the rest of my life."

were wrong dot. I say fuck them''

There was little to distract him. "There was lots of countryside, lots of getting on my bike and going off for the day, and lots of climbing trees with my mates, but mostly we were a real family family. We were just all together, all the time. We enjoyed each other's company and didn't really need outsiders."

Even though he "hashed up" his A-Levels, getting two Cs and an E, he went to Manchester University on clearing to read drama. Once there he performed lunchtimes at The Band On The Wall club with a comedy group called Twentieth-Century Coyote (which included long-standing sidekick Ade Edmondson); he appeared at the 1978 National Student Drama Festival, where he picked up the Boris Karloff award for the most outrageous ham; and he lived in a student house (now demolished) in East Didsbury that would form part of the inspiration for *The Young Ones*, written with two university friends – Lise Mayer and Ben Elton.

Although Mayall would shortly become associated with the new vanguard of alternative, left-wing comics who were to break the British comedy mould in the late Seventies, his time at Manchester was closer to Bacchus than Marx. "There was a big split in my year between the right-on worthies and the good-time gits," he says. "I was a good-time git. There were an awful lot of Red Spanner, Red Trousers, Red Ladder-type theatre companies doing Marxism for three-year-olds which was not sexy and not fun to watch. So

we just avoided that because it was dull. Basically we used to take the piss. They'd be on the steps of the union shouting 'Morning Star!' and we'd shout back 'Morning, love!'"

He toured England and America with the Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company playing Dromio of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors*, went to the Edinburgh Festival to perform *Death on the Toilet*, a 40-minute play he had written with Edmondson, and by the end of 1979 was in London performing regularly at the newly formed comedy hothouse, Soho's Comedy Store. By the time he had moved on to the nearby Comic Strip, Mayall had been seriously spotted, and the TV offers followed: *A Kick up the Eighties*, *The Comic Strip Presents...* and, crucially, two series of *The Young Ones*.

It is difficult now to appreciate the impact *The Young Ones* had on a whole TV generation. It was wild, anarchic, loud and low. Teenagers adopted the foursome's accents, mannerisms and catch phrases. "Hippie" became a universal term of abuse. It predated

Viz and downgraded Python. The great British sitcom has never quite recovered.

Mayall has never left behind this desire to get over-excitable and misbehave, continuing it (with darker and more desperate undertones) in *Bottom*, written again with Edmondson, but he has been careful to develop other sides to his character-based comedy. Most importantly, he has played the worryingly popular Alan B'Stard in *The New Statesman*. "I love fart jokes and all the stupid trousers-down stuff," he says, "but they don't actually give me the range to project everything I'm experiencing. I need something else."

Not that Mayall hasn't made mistakes. *Drop Dead Fred*, written expressly for him and trumpeted as his big Hollywood break, may have made money all over the world, but to many it was simply Manic Mayall writ large. And while contemporaries like Robbie Coltrane and French & Saunders laughed off offers to appear in the lamentable *Carry on Columbus*, Mayall sailed blithely on, steered by a laudable if cavalier desire to be part of a great British comedy tradition. "Sure I wasn't at my best, and I sort of knew it would be crap, but I thought, fuck it, I want to be in a *Carry on* – there might not be any more."

His theatre performances have also met with mixed reviews. While he was praised for his comic, cackling interpretation of Khles-

takov in Gogol's *The Government Inspector* at the National, and his very desperate, yet very funny, portrait of would-be TV star Nick in Simon Gray's *The Common Pursuit*, he has also been accused of having a self-indulgent acting style and a limited technique. The harshest criticism was left for his most ambitious project to date: Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. While few critics could find fault in Mayall and Edmondson's vaudevillian reading of the play, many argued it was at the expense of its contrapuntal bleakness, pain and existential desolation. The *Daily Mail*'s Jack Tinker even ventured: "This is not acting. It is showing off."

"The critics were wrong, that's all," Mayall responds, bullishly. "I say fuck them, really. Because it was the best production of *Godot* there has ever been." What, ever? "Well, I didn't see the original production, because I wasn't alive, but yes."

The confluence of mania and mainstream brings him to an interesting stage in his career. While his current ten-week, 43-date regional tour of *Bottom* both reaffirms his "marriage made in the lav" with Edmondson and keeps his slapstick traditions alive, his most challenging roles lie within the *Rik Mayall Presents* trilogy, which feature Mayall in much straighter TV roles than we have seen before. In *Micky Love*, for example, the best of the three, he's a bungling but benign northern game show host grappling with alcoholism and rumours that he is about to be axed.

"There will be people who will be disappointed because they are not out-and-out comedies," he says, "but I hope they will get as much pleasure from the stories as from the laughs. This is the most exciting aspect of my career at present. I realise now I've only scratched the surface of what I can do."

In the meantime, Rik Mayall seems to have other things on his mind. Still up on his feet at the Groucho Club, he is smoking his twelfth cigarette. He is at the window now, motionless for a moment, looking down at the street. "I hope I'm a good person, but I'd like to know what it's all about."

He begins pacing the room again, hands in pockets. "A lot of comedy is about passing the time in the waiting room. I don't know what we're waiting for, and I don't know what's on the other side, but what do we do while we're all sitting around bored and feeling slightly nervous? We may as well have a good time and entertain people. I enjoy entertaining them; they enjoy being entertained." He moves forward, faces me, and lets out a stifled snigger. "What I like best in all the world is hearing the sound of laughter." ■

Rik Mayall Presents is on ITV at 9pm from Thursday, May 20. **Bottom** tours until June 21.



Mayall of the species: with his wife Barbara and their two children