

Eddie Izzard's Supermarket on the Moon

As a transgenderist, day one is hell.

The Observer, May 2001

Eddie Izzard's fashion sense has always been an exciting area for discussion, but on his official website not everyone is impressed with the way things are going. 'Lately, Eddie's wardrobe can be described as black,' writes someone called Squeaky. 'Black T-shirt, black jeans, black shoes.' 'Hi Squeaky,' writes Teri. 'Hubby and I were discussing this in passing last night... I wonder if it is just ease of packing that has him in the same outfit... or the "bloke" mode he is currently in. He does look good in it... but I would prefer some more flair... he is TV, for God's sake. Hugs to all!' 'Allo Teri!' writes another fan. 'I think he is convinced that black is slenderising and I'm afraid he's caught that Hollywood thin disease. His bloke look is to convince casting directors that he can be cast in any male role and not be stuck in the weirdo transvestite ghetto, a very small ghetto indeed! I just wish he'd put on a touch of mascara though, for telly, to make his eyes show more. But that's just a female thing...'

His fans are right: the clothes are very dark, he does look good in them. On this showery morning in mid-May he is wearing his dark leather jacket and trousers at Her Majesty's Theatre in London's Haymarket, smoking a cigarette, explaining how he lost weight by watching his carbohydrates, reciting Monty Python, answering personal questions with habitual frankness.

We are sitting, quite reasonably, in the dress circle, talking about the thing Eddie Izzard is most famous for, apart from occasionally being the funniest man in Britain. It may be that he is quite sick of discussing his transvestism, or as he mostly calls it these days, his transgenderism, but he displays no sign of this. In fact, he talks better about transvestism than anything else, and recently he has found more reason to discuss it than usual. Last month he visited the Argentine embassy in London to demand what he has for a long time called 'equal clothing rights'. 'I stood on Argentine territory at the foot of their embassy and said, "I'm a transvestite, I'm on your property, so arrest me and beat the shit out of me like you did with your other transvestites!" Well, I don't know if I quite said that, but that was the main message...'

And what happened? 'They wouldn't even open the door.'

Izzard has been openly wearing unconventional clothes and make-up for 16 years, since he was 23, and he is still the only out transvestite in public life. That we know of. 'There are a number of people out there who I think could well be TV,' he says. 'Pretty definitely are TV. But they're not saying they're TV because I think they think there's still too much of a negative image. I'm still waiting for the big flood of people.'

To get this straight: Izzard is not a drag artist; he does not wear women's clothes for stage effect or laughs; he likes to dispute that they are women's clothes at all,

just clothes that make him feel sexy or good. He is not gay, and he remains guarded about his private life, although he reluctantly admits to having a female partner. When pushed, he says, 'I've been in a relationship thingy. But how far do you want to go down this line? The situation is that the person [I'm with] would not like it to be a big "These people are going out together!" Sometimes people play that game - "Look! We're going out. See this whole profile thing happen!" But we're trying not to play that game. At some point I can see I'm going to have to do this whole OK! - magazine-at-home thing...'

Izzard was born in Yemen, where his father worked at the BP oil refinery. The family moved to Northern Ireland before he could talk, and to Wales when he was five. He struggled through boarding schools with dyslexia, and like most things in his life this became a subject for his routines. In the programme notes for one show, he wrote how one school 'was run by a very pleasant man called Mr Crump whom we nicknamed "the man from hell who we hate". Seeing as my mum had just died, I decided to cry relentlessly for about a year. Mr Crump would help me along with beatings when he could fit them in.'

His mother, a nurse, died from cancer when he was six, an event that he believes had little bearing on his passion for skirts. He says he knew from the age of four. 'Some boy on my estate was wearing a dress and I thought, "Oh that's something I'd be into."' At 15 he was arrested for shoplifting lipstick from Boots in Bexhill-on-Sea, an event that also found its way on stage: 'I had it under some brown bread. I was walking out, kind of casual, and I was caught immediately.' He explained it was for a friend. 'I was 15, so they let me off with a warning. And the warning was: "That lipstick's never going to work with that eye shadow, is it?"'

He came out with the aid of an Islington self-help group. 'I did a whole six months wearing make-up and skirts - I just wore them every day. From day one, the hassle you get is through the roof and you have no social skills to deal with it. And then it calms down, and you develop those skills and you get your look together more. But your day one is hell, and your day two is hell minus one day. You have to step over this huge mental barrier. I've only just worked this out, actually.'

Izzard's day one came in 1987, but it took six years before he first wore a skirt on stage, at a venue 'where established comics do five minutes of new material. I wore the new material.' These days he must contend with the complaint that he only wore skirts to further his career, a suggestion he counters with mild exasperation and a handy career summary. 'Not true. Because I'd done Edinburgh and got Perrier nominations, then I did Bloomsbury, which was three days extended to five, then the Hackney Empire, then the Shaw Theatre for six weeks. I was only talking about being transvestite, but not wearing anything, and then someone in the newspapers said, "Well, I've never seen him wear a dress!" So I wore a fucking dress and make-up.' Did he seek any advice?

'Who's going to advise me? Captain and Tenille? I don't think anyone on the planet would have advised me to do it. No, I'm the strategy guy. I was advised no, but that was more a family thing.'

A few years ago he was beaten up on a British tour by six men who didn't like the way he looked. And now there's a suspicion that he's lately abandoned wearing the frocks because they've served their purpose. 'I've heard a number of things,'

he says. 'This is the baggage you have to deal with. I am transgender - it doesn't go away. But if I don't wear make-up for five years then it's my fucking life, and I have the freedom to do what I want. I can go blokey for five days, and then one day I'll wear more make-up than anyone's ever worn in the history of make-up. That's fine, that's my friggin' choice. The question at the beginning was how to launch your sexuality and not lose your career. It was 60/40 that the career could go down the dumpster.'

The career has not done so. It is not hard to describe what has made Izzard successful - wonderfully funny two-hour monologues at live theatres all over the world - but it is very difficult to explain precisely what happens during these shows. Essentially he just strolls around talking. He talks about foreign languages, Sweden, dyslexia, about horror movies. There are no conventional jokes, and no one goes into a pub with a pig. Cats wear pants. Latin generals talk in high voices. Squirrels suddenly stop eating their hazelnuts to glance around ('Did I leave the stove on?'). He used to end certain observations with the comment 'True story!' or 'Absolute bollocks!', but by then you'd be gasping for air in the aisles. Like the best magic shows, it is almost impossible, on your journey home, to describe just what it was you witnessed. He once said his heroes were Steve Martin, John Cleese and Billy Connolly, and now they have become his fans. He has acquired a little from all of them: some absurdity, some frantic comic actions, an uncommon ability to drive the energy levels of a packed theatre. He once sold out Wembley Arena, and played it like it was Wembley Park tube station.

In a few weeks, he returns to the venue with some other comic and musical talents as the host of a show called, unusually, We Know Where You Live. Live!, a benefit night for Amnesty International, the launch of which he celebrated with that matchless show of strength at the Argentine embassy. The show is a successor to Amnesty's innovative Secret Policeman's Balls, in which many of Izzard's idols made him ill with envy. 'I would have given left legs and left arms to be doing stuff like that. I never saw them live, and when the videos came out I never rushed to buy them because I thought it would have been so great to do that that it would have pissed me off too much. I never wanted to be a stand-up. I just wanted to be a Python.'

He remembers Python's rendition of Four Yorkshiremen, with a special appearance from Rowan Atkinson. Izzard used to recite it in chemistry class with the boy sitting next to him. 'All four parts, which we used to rotate.' This particular sketch took place in the same theatre he is sitting in now, and he can't help himself. He starts the routine, fast and monotonous, like a mantra, with all emphasis lost. 'In those days we were glad for the price of a cup of tea - a cup of cold tea - without milk or sugar - or tea - in a cracked cup - ooh we never had a cup, used to drink out of a rolled-up newspaper - the best we could manage was to suck on a damp cloth...' He snaps out of it. He repeats: 'I would have liked to have done that.'

'Eddie was the natural choice to take over the baton from John Cleese,' says Andy Hackman, Amnesty's director of fundraising, a fan of Izzard's since he saw him in small clubs in the early 90s. Cleese had organised the first show in the 70s, and has been heavily involved since. 'We felt we couldn't ask him again because he'd

already done so much, and it was partly our suggestion that he write to Eddie Izzard asking if he'd take over. Partly a symbolic thing.' Hackman says this is the first large Amnesty event for 10 years because the charity benefit market has become so crowded, and because they didn't want to dilute the very warm feeling people held towards earlier shows. But on its 40th birthday he could think of only one perfect figurehead.

'Eddie has an international outlook - he says things like "I'm a citizen of the world, I'm concerned with human politics..." So that's a very good fit for us, and his audience is a good match for us as well.' Hackman hopes that proceeds from the show - including the usual rack of videos and keyrings - will amount to £200,000, but the ambitions are wider: to raise awareness, to extend Amnesty's UK membership from its present figure of 150,000. 'It's quite an undertaking,' Izzard says. 'I have changed the title, which people will think is changing something sacrosanct. But I always thought the name The Secret Policeman's Ball was odd. Was it for secret policemen? No, we hate fucking secret policemen. So it always got me hoping that the Secret Policeman would do very badly out of his own gig.'

The new title came from discussions Izzard had with the advertising man Trevor Beattie. "'We know where you live" is what gangsters say, so I suppose it's still a bit double-headed, but the idea of ours was to say to dictators or other people who violate the basic human rights: "We do know who and where you are, and we will track you forever..." Izzard's official title is creative director, a position he has decided sounds a bit grand. The show has many producers and advisers, and Izzard says he is really just running the event on the night. 'I didn't really want to be that person who calls people up and asks them to do it, because I thought a lot of people could get very offended if I didn't ask them.' It's not quite like Live Aid, where Bob Geldof almost threatened to pull people's teeth out if they didn't show up. 'I did some phoning around, but I wouldn't put their backs to the wall, because it's not that sort of situation. Amnesty is a long-term thing. It's not like there's a southern-hemisphere- suddenly-everyone's-in-prison thing.'

Dom Joly, the man behind Trigger Happy TV, where the TV stands for television, told me he met Izzard at the supermarket. 'We shop at the same Sainsbury's in Ladbroke Grove. We met at the meat counter and started chatting about it. He came up to me, gave a nod of acknowledgement, and said, "Have we approached you about this gig?" and I said no.' When I relate this to Izzard he shakes his head. 'Ummmm... I certainly don't remember that. But then it is his job to fuck with people's minds. Er... we were actually on a supermarket on the moon...' As the host, Izzard will provide brief links between the other acts, something he used to do a lot on the comedy circuit in his early days. The confirmed acts include Harry Enfield, Tom Jones, Harry Hill, Badly Drawn Boy, Richard Blackwood and people from Goodness Gracious Me (there are some big names as yet unconfirmed). Dom Joly says he hopes to do a unique version of Stars in Their Eyes. 'They're hinting that Mick Jagger will be Matthew Kelly, which would be too surreal. I might do the big mobile thing despite my best efforts and maybe some violent squirrels or something.'

Joly has never done live stage work. What sort of meetings has he had with Izzard about this? 'Absolutely none. I think it's just turning up on the day to the

rehearsals at three in the afternoon.' Izzard is not a member of Amnesty, but he has done other, smaller shows for them. He is unsure about how much he'll talk about the cause on the night. 'I'll work it out when I get there, but it's a difficult thing. Like when Queen went on at Live Aid and sang "We Are The Champions". Who are the champions? The people we're raising money for? The band? The audience? I think you just have to approach it as a piece of entertainment under the Amnesty banner. If you went on and did this whole political lecture, it wouldn't be sold to television.' It will be Izzard's first gig for a year, though this week there are some warm-up shows in London clubs to try the new material. He's done much apart from stand-up - successful stage performances in David Mamet's *Cryptogram* and the lead in *Lenny*, an unsuccessful television project called *Cows* (a sort of bovine *Planet of the Apes* in which cows ran the country - for all of one episode on Channel 4). He finds some time for political work. He has given thousands of pounds to Labour, and supported its European ambitions ('Let's be up there in the driving seat!'). He is one of the few professional comedians mentioned in *Hansard*. In December 1999, Tam Dalyell asked about the engagements the minister for Europe held with Eddie Izzard in Paris. Keith Vaz replied: 'Mr Izzard and I gave an interview to the *Today* programme and attended a meeting to mark the 50th anniversary of the Council of Europe. We then boarded the Eurostar and spoke to passengers about Europe...'

These days Izzard is concentrating on film work, with mixed results. He has acquitted himself respectably in *Velvet Goldmine*, *The Avengers*, *Mystery Men*, *Circus* and *Shadow of the Vampire*, but the movies themselves were second rate. He's more optimistic about his forthcoming projects, not least his role as Charlie Chaplin in Peter Bogdanovich's *The Cat's Meow* (a 20s seaborne mystery/love story involving Marion Davies and William Randolph Hearst) and in *All the Queen's Men*, a Second World War drama in which he plays a gun-toting bisexual transvestite alongside Matt LeBlanc, which sounds just like the sort of film that other great cross-dresser Ed Wood would have been proud to make.

For Izzard the film world is not a diversion. 'I wanted to be a film actor before I wanted to be a stand-up,' he says, 'so I've gone all around the circle just to get to the place I wanted to start off at.' He used to say he wouldn't do comedy roles, but the stipulation is softening. He knows it hasn't all gone terrifically. 'I still have to prove myself. I'm just learning the technique. My confidence is higher now - at the beginning I didn't really know quite what I was doing. It's a bit like being in a moon rocket, having to wait two weeks until it gets there. You can't do it any quicker.'

In his new environment, he has to be careful with the cross-dressing. 'It confuses people, but that's a burden to bear during this period of getting this transgender profile together. You've got to be smart about it, the way Ian McKellen is about being gay in Hollywood. You have to have your bullshit detector on, you have to have every detector on. With transgender you have to be proactive, and I'm going to have to set up my own films, that's the only way I'm going to get forward.'

Towards the end of our interview, I gave Izzard a book I thought he would like called *How Far Will You Go: Questions to Test Your Limits*. In the Library of Congress, this book is filed under *Conduct of Life - Miscellanea*. He answered some of the questions. What is the least amount of money you'd need never to

have sex again? 'That wouldn't happen,' he said, 'because I'm not really interested in money. Infinity money. So therefore I'd be happy to continue having sex.'

What was the worst year of your life? '1968.' When your mother died? 'Yes. And also Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. In retrospect, it was a shit old year. At the end of that year, someone wrote a letter to an Apollo crew when they were orbiting the moon, and the letter said, "Thank you for saving 1968."

What are you most underappreciated for? 'Nothing really... Perhaps doing gigs in French. I have to tell people that two or three times. Because it does sound like I pushed peas up mountains with my nose. It was hard to do. I'm going to do a gig in German at the end of 2002.'

Who is the person you'd most like to see naked? 'Most people, if you're talking about attractive women, then you probably have seen them naked. In most publications around the world. Ummm... Sharon Stone, I suppose... If I said some woman from number 23, people couldn't get a handle on it.'

What's your best memory from childhood? 'Being in Northern Ireland, throwing mud balls at passing cars.'

What's the biggest lie you've ever told? 'I said that I knew my mother was dying. My aunt later said, "Yes, she said that she thought you'd knew." I used to lie all the time. So I stopped lying at that point, suddenly, which totally threw my dad. He said, "I'm asking you where things are, and you're saying where they are, and they are actually there! Why are you doing this?"'

'What's the best letter you've ever received? 'Probably one from my dad after I told him I was transvestite. He said to me it was OK at the time, and then a couple of days later he wrote to say that if my mum was alive she'd think it was OK, too.'