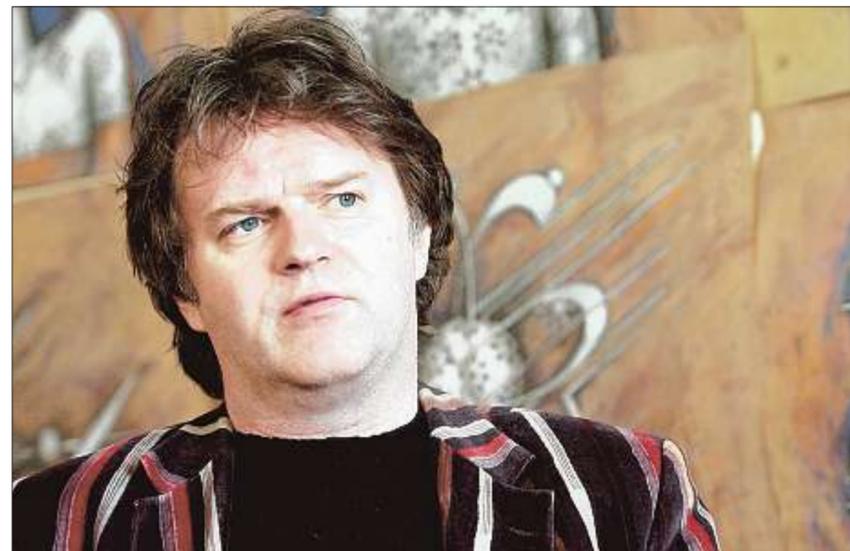


It's Saturday!

# The Saturday Interview



## City has a place in Merton's heart

**I**T'S an aptly weird way to meet one of Britain's funniest men. I'm at the Phoenix Centre on Townhill. It's raining. A taxi pulls up and Paul Merton folds himself out of it (he's very tall). He's accompanied by a small, round man with a bright green moustache.

If Merton finds this as surreal as I do, he doesn't show it. Robert Conybeare (he of the green moustache) opens the door to his studio and we shuffle into a wonderland of wood and metal sculptures.

The walls are covered, floor to ceiling, with Conybeare's precise and passionate drawings. There is nowhere to sit so Merton wanders around looking slightly lost (which is rather endearing) and taking in the artwork.

It's easy to see why Merton chose to sponsor Conybeare. Yes, they've been friends for years and Merton clearly attaches real value to that, but Conybeare's work is extraordinary.

It would be tragic if these drawings never became full scale sculptures, and until Merton stepped in with funding, that seemed the most likely outcome.

To make a living, Conybeare has spent years making public art. His creations can be seen in towns and cities all over Britain and many of the sculptures around Swansea Marina, including the Lighthouse Tower, were made by him.

Now, rather than work within the confines of a brief, he can make exactly what he wants to — and the results will be exhibited in the Mission Gallery late next year.

Conybeare's friendship with Merton began in 1981, when Conybeare was organising the Swansea Fringe Festival.

24-year-old Merton had recently left the civil service to pursue his dream of being a comedian and together with co-writer John Irwin he was looking for somewhere to perform.

"I always have a high regard for Swansea because this is where we started," he says.

"It was the very first thing we did in terms of getting up in front of an audience — we hired a church hall (St Jude's on Mount Pleasant), there was just two of us and we sold tickets on the door."

Had Merton been richer he might never have visited Swansea.

Comedian Paul Merton started his career in Swansea and maintains strong links with the city. He spoke to Jenny White about life, comedy and his decision to sponsor Swansea-based artist Robert Conybeare.

"We wanted to go to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, but that cost a lot of money," he recalls. "Swansea fringe festival had a £5 entry fee. That's what we could afford so that's what we did."

It was a wise move: Merton and Irwin did 12 consecutive shows, a long run for two total beginners.

"I think one time we had an audience of about 17 people, and we were really excited," he laughs. "And Rob was really good because he'd come along and give some advice."

Did the show ever go really badly?

"No, there wasn't anything particularly bad. But," he smiles, "there was a lot of...quiet."

Paul Martin became Paul Merton early in his career when he applied for his Equity card.

"You couldn't have two people with the same name registered with Equity. I think it was to stop people calling themselves John Gielgud."

"There was another Paul Martin, so I had to change my name. I went through a period of thinking, 'do I change my first name? Do I suddenly become Barry? But I was living in the London Borough of Merton and the thing that swung it for me was that I didn't have to change my autograph.'"

Merton had practised this in school. He admits that, even then, his ambition was clear.

"From a very early age I wanted to be a comedian. I remember going to see a circus when I was about three or four and being amazed by the clowns because they were behaving in a way I'd never seen adults behave — you know, floppy shoes, cars exploding, buckets of whitewash up ladders. I just wanted to be part of that whole process of laughter really."

Merton became the "funny boy" in school though he insists he was also quite shy.

"It's a strange combination," he says. "A lot of shy people go into performing — I think it expresses that other side of themselves they can't easily express in day to day interaction."

As he grew, so did his ambition, but it remained a secret.

"It's difficult to say, 'I want to be a comedian.' Now we're used to the idea of comedy clubs but then, in the mid Seventies, you might as well say, 'I'm going to live on Neptune with a large squirrel called Tom.'"

Merton feared that people would laugh "in the wrong way" at the idea: "You're presuming that you're a funny person, so it was a big thing to admit and it took me long time to get round to it."

Once the decision was made, though, he stuck with it, and by 1990 he had numerous television credits including a role in news satire programme Have I Got News For You, the show for which he is probably best known today.

Fans of the series will know Merton's humour as snappy, sarcastic and often ruthless. In real life he's no less funny but has more warmth than you might expect, a great laugh and is delightfully free from the false gloss or smarm of celebrity.

In fact, he seems deliberately un-glossy: his jumper has a hole in it and his jacket must be an old favourite because in the course of a week I see him wearing it on telly twice, and once in a national newspaper.

All this exposure means that most people know three things about Merton: one, that early in his career, he spent a few weeks in a mental hospital (a result, he thinks, of overwork and antimalarial pills), two: he used to be married to actress Caroline Quentin (of Men Behaving Badly fame), and three: his second wife, TV producer Sarah Parkinson, died from breast cancer in 2003.

A dubious privilege of celebrity is that interviewees tend to drag you back to points like this, curious as to how a comedian handles personal tragedy.

When Parkinson was ill, Merton coped by continuing his regular appearances at London's Comedy Store. It was a lifeline: "If you're doing an improv show and everybody's laughing then

that's great, that's a wonderful place to be," he says. "And you can only be thinking of one thing at one time so if that may be being funny, then that's good. That's a good thing to be doing."

Despite his admiration for depressive comedian Tony Hancock (remember those wonderful remakes of Hancock's Half Hour?) Merton doesn't buy the whole the tortured comedy genius thing.

"I think it's a myth. It seems a romantic notion: a funny person who's then feeling suicidal in a London hotel or whatever — but no, comedians actually are among the most well-balanced people I know because they enjoy the job they're doing and that helps for happiness."

"I'm sure there are comedians with dark sides but they'd be people with dark sides if they were plumbers or minicab drivers or government ministers or whatever. The dark side doesn't make you a comic necessarily."

Being funny seems so natural to him that I ask whether he finds his job easy. He takes a long pause, mulling it over.

"Erm...no," he says, carefully. "It's not easy but neither is it tremendously difficult. 'Easy' suggests you get lazy or you're not paying much attention to it."

"If you're doing everything right and you're being funny it can seem to be easy that night but you can never guarantee saying anything funny again. So in that sense there's a slight worry in the back of your head."

He adds that comedians do not have the monopoly on humour. "We're all funny with people that we know and relax with. The trick is being that relaxed in front of a whole group of people who don't know who you, so you have to find universal jokes."

Merton's advice for aspiring comedians is this: "Just find a gig somewhere and get up and try it. If it's not good at first — and it probably won't be — then don't be put off."

It reflects his own experience, with years spent on the comedy circuit before he found fame.

Now, back in the town where it all began, I doubt that Merton seems much different from the man Conybeare met all those years ago. Only now he's helping Conybeare out, being coaxed into amusing poses by one in a long line of photographers who will help publicise his friend's artwork. Merton remains good humoured and plays along.

The bizarre is, after all, his bread and butter.



**FUNNY FACE** Above — Paul Merton chats about the early days of his career in Swansea. The comedian is pictured with artist and good friend Robert Conybeare.

Pictures: Adrian White D050113/6644/AW



Mal Pope continues his exclusive diary about his own personal countdown to the launch of his new musical Amazing Grace. This week it's time to get down to the nitty gritty as rehearsals start ...

**W**ELL, this is where all the talking stops, and well, all the talking and singing starts. We are now in rehearsals and all the script consultations, writing sessions and production meetings finally take a back seat as we get down to the nitty gritty. It started with the meet and greet.

Monday was the first time that we had all of the actors in one room. One of the strange things about auditions is that as well as looking at the performance of every actor you are also trying to imagine how they will look and work together with other actors.

There's a great scene in the Dustin Hoffman film Tootsie where he plays the part of a struggling actor doing his best at an audition. After his audition piece the director says, "we want someone taller". Hoffman says "I can be taller". The director then adds, "we want someone older". Dustin argues, "I can be older". Finally the director shouts "we want someone else".

So really it depends on so many things why someone gets offered the role and someone equally good doesn't. Mind you, try telling that to an insecure actor.

Anyway it was almost touching as we introduced a father to a mother, Evan Roberts met Annie Davies, the girl who is secretly in love with him.

A group of potential miners talked about skiing holidays, how they had just finished performing Shakespeare and as miners should they stoop or cough a lot. It was slightly surreal, amusing and very exciting.

After the coffee and cakes we sat down to read through the whole script and as no-one else knows the songs I had to sing each of them in the appropriate place.

What I had forgotten was that I had written some of these songs over a year ago. Some I hadn't played since the day I wrote them recorded the original demo version to play the director, Michael Bogdanov.

There were a quite a few embarrassing moments where I had to tell everyone, "Hang on, I just need a minute to work out how this goes". Know it, I wrote it!

Having sat in a circle and heard the words and songs all together, one of the first things that became apparent was that it wasn't right.

Concerned, I met Michael Bogdanov for a coffee afterwards and found out he wasn't too bothered.

"What did you expect?" he asked me. "It's like a living, breathing thing a new musical. We have the plans, the blueprint and now we start to create the musical" he told me.

It's not surprising that that it has been hard trying to switch off from thinking about the show; but I did fall asleep watching the Arsenal versus Bayern Munich football game.

What that meant was that when I eventually went to bed I lay there, staring at the ceiling, completely wide awake.

To be honest, we've always had a bit of a worry about how the show ends. Should it be Dynasty-style where everyone gets killed, what about a Hollywood ending where everybody falls in love and the guy gets the girl.

Maybe a cliff hanger so we can come back next year with Amazing Grace 2 — The return of Evan Roberts.

I got out of bed and sat down at my desk with a cup of coffee and with the script in front of me. Suddenly it all became clear. What we really needed to do to end the show was to ... Well, obviously, I can't say exactly as that would spoil it, but what I can say was an ending came to mind.

The next morning I went in to the Grand early and cornered Michael. I told him my latest idea. He sat there quietly shifting scenes around in his script. Every so often he'd ask a question. "So if we did this, we wouldn't need this would we?" I'd agree and a whole section of script would hit the floor, together with one of the songs. I'm thinking, "Doesn't he know the blood, sweat and tears that went into that song?"

It's a tough business this world of theatre, for the actors, directors — and writers.