

matt jones

Interview – The Comedian, Jasper Carrott

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Carrott in a stew about humour

*British funnyman Jasper Carrott brings his deadpan wit back to Dubai, proving he still has a terrific sense of humour. **Matt Jones** reports.*

Jasper Carrott – uncrowned king of Britain’s comedy allotment, self-proclaimed family man, Birmingham City supporter, “the only Brummie luvvie” – sits in the darkness of Dubai’s Premier nightspot and reflects seriously on what his brand of humour is not.

“There’s a very heavy trend – I don’t want to get on any moral high horse – but a trend in stand-up comedy that seems to be all about orifices and what goes into them and what comes out of them and bodily functions of all sorts, and there’s very little of that,” says the wiry comedian, singer and actor, who’ll be 52 next month.

“What I try and do is treat the audience with a bit of respect and a bit of intelligence and ask them to get involved, not in a vocal way, but to try and understand the emotions that I’m talking about when I’m talking about either experiences that have happened to me, or social comment, or even some political satire.”

Carrott, who shot to fame – and the top of the British pop music charts – in 1975 with *Funky Moped* and a hilarious adult spin on the popular children’s TV programme of the day, *Magic Roundabout* – relied on observational humour in the late ’70s but has adapted his approach since then.

“These days everyone does observation,” he says, between sips of tea made by his manager Steve Hutt. “In the ’50s and ’60s Irish jokes were very funny – not that I told too many – but then everybody started to tell Irish jokes. So it would never work on television because everybody knew the jokes.

“Then I came along with observational humour saying, ‘Does the crazy on the bus sit next to you?’ and it was very successful. But then of course everybody started observing and then you had to be ahead of that and do not just observation but observation with good jokes.”

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According to Carrott, it has gone a bit further. “What’s happening now is that newcomers and old hands alike are ramming expletives down the audience’s throat to get the laugh – the easy way to do things.

“Stand-up comedy has got about as basic as you can get,” Carrott says. “Roy Chubby Brown in England, the Diceman in America. I think there’s got to be a move really away from that back into the sort of Bob Newhart style or Bill Cosby. Not going back, but reasoned comedy, comedy that you can get involved with yourself. It’s not just rammed down you all the time coming at a hundred miles an hour with no theme or with no... integrity.

“I hope I’m not sounding too pompous. I don’t mean to be and I’m not saying you shouldn’t swear or whatever, you can do what you like on stage, it doesn’t shock me, I’m not shocked at all, I’ve heard it all, but it doesn’t make me laugh.

“When Steve Martin was a stand-up he was a very funny man and we seem to have lost that somehow or other. Maybe I’m wrong. My next project for the BBC is to try and alter the balance a bit really. Observation is part of it, but it’s more than that.”

Carrott adds that very few acts today stand back and take the time to develop themes. If that’s not working, on to another theme to try and get you to laugh. His goal, he says, is to have people leaving comedy shows, “with that lovely feeling that there’s some warmth in human nature”.

Carrott, who co-starred with actor Robert Powell in the successful BBC series *The Detectives*, will start work on six half-hour TV shows of old material when he returns to Britain.

But his “major project” will be eight half-hour shows of pure stand-up to be broadcast in 1999. “I know that sounds a long way away but to write eight half-hours is an enormous project,” says the man who, in 1986, introduced his British TV audience to American comedian Jerry Seinfeld. “That will incorporate a major tour of the UK to work the material out for TV and some sorties abroad, maybe here again.”

Carrott, who rates British funny men Eddie Izzard, Jack Dee and Rowan Atkinson as people that make him laugh, is back in Dubai after a four-year absence for shows tonight and tomorrow night at the emirate’s Hyatt Regency hotel.

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His current tout of expatriate enclaves in Australia, Thailand, the UAE and Bahrain might have been called the 25th Wedding Anniversary Tour – his wife Hazel, who he married two years after falling in love with stand-up, is sunning herself poolside as we speak.

For all the earnest pontificating about the business he's in, Carrott, who quickly establishes first name terms with those around him, is as animated and as funny in person as he is on stage. But he's not overbearing, and there's no sense that he's putting on an act.

The Carrott stew of statement and opinion is peppered with gags ("In 1989 John Major was unknown in England, and now he's unknown all over the world") and self-deprecating "heaven forbids"; bold statements are often qualified by tagging a soft Brummie "really" at the end. "I'm always who I am, what I am, where I am," he says.

Where he is now is, of course, Dubai, where he had two sell-out shows in 1993. "It's very rare you get hommous for breakfast and I'm quite partial to it," he admits. "I remember the taxi drivers from last time. Apart from having a death wish they're so keen to please you that whatever you say to them they will take you somewhere. In the end I started being silly. I started saying, 'Southampton, please,' and they would drive off and drop you at the market or something.

"In the end I said to a guy, 'Madame Tussaud's'. He never blinked an eye, dropped me at a restaurant and swore blind that it had changed its name and a month ago had been called Madame Tussaud's. "So I thought, 'Well, enterprise like that, double the tip.'"

(ends)