

EXCERPTS FROM
“I STOLE FREDDIE MERCURY’S BIRTHDAY CAKE”
the autobiography of Malcolm Hardee, 1996

CHAPTER 14:
GLENDIA JACKSON, EMMA THOMPSON, A TRACTOR

We did *OTT* in January 1981 then we did our first Edinburgh Fringe in August 1982, before it became so commercial.

That year, we were playing in a venue called The Hole in The Ground which literally was just that: a hole in the ground. An ‘organisation’ called Circuit had erected a 700-seat marquee on this piece of derelict wasteland.

Also performing in The Hole in The Ground was The Egg Man, who was Icelandic years before Bjork. His show consisted of a two-hour monologue performed, completely in Icelandic, to an audience of one in a cave which was one of the ‘natural features’ of The Hole in The Ground. He used to auction the ticket for each show and a reviewer from the *Scotsman* actually had to pay over £50 to watch a performance of this two-hour Icelandic monologue. He couldn’t understand a word but, in a way, it was Art.

Today, this just wouldn’t happen as the big Agencies use Edinburgh to hype-up future short-lived TV ‘stars’.

In our tent in The Hole in The Ground were several other shows, the one before us being The National Revue Company. This included Arthur Smith, Phil Nice, Adam Wide and ‘Joy Pickles’ played by Babs Sutton. She ended up living with Martin Soan for two or three years and she later got concussed by a beer glass thrown at my London club The Tunnel. There was also a woman called Maxine who married Phil Nice. She settled down to breed kids so you don’t see her any more.

That first year, the Circuit tent in Edinburgh held about 700 people.

I had stupidly agreed we’d do it for a ‘wage’ of £500 a week. In the meantime, we’d been on the *OTT*, we were popular and we were selling the tickets out at about £5 a ticket. So they were making about £3,500 a

night and we were getting £500 per week between the three of us. So I felt bitter again.

There was another lot performing at The Hole in The Ground: a group of feminists. They were called Monstrous Regiment. They were doing a play about prisoners. About how it's not the prisoners' fault they're in prison. It's Society's fault. It's all of our faults. All of that nonsense.

We were really poor that first year. We were performing in The Tent in The Hole in The Ground and we were living in tents next to The Tent. Edinburgh is always cold and it was even colder that year: it snowed.

Also that year, a German opera show had a pig in it and I had my tent next to the place where they kept the pig.

So, I was feeling bitter and feeling bitter cold.

At the end of the week, Circuit decided to have a Press Conference and they put *another* tent up. They loved a tent. A big marquee. Commissionaire outside. Posh. We turned up and they wouldn't let us in even though we'd been there a week and sold out our shows and everything. Well, we *were* naked, which might have had something to do with it. And not entirely wholesome. So we went and got dressed and eventually they let us in. But I was still bitter.

We went to this restaurant in the marquee and it was a bit of a posh do. Wine and all that stuff going on. Monstrous Regiment were there but their feminist dungarees were off and their public school cocktail dresses were on.

Then one of the Monstrous Regiment women - one I particularly didn't like - got her handbag nicked. And she went berserk.

"Catch him!" she yelled. "Get the police! I want that man put in prison!"

So I said to her:

"It's not his fault. It's Society's fault. It's all our faults".

At the end of all this, they asked one person from each show to get up on the bar and give a speech to the assembled Press.

By now, the Monstrous Regiment woman had calmed down. She got up on the bar and said:

“We’re doing a play. It’s about prisoners. It’s all Society’s fault and it’s a scathing indictment of Society”.

Then she jumped off the bar and the German with the pig got up.

“We’re doing an opera with a pig,” he said.

So we were next and I stood up on the bar, having told Martin to tug my trousers at the appropriate moment.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen of the Press,” I started saying: “We’re The Greatest Show on Legs and we have a bit of a comedy show in that tent over there, but this is no night for comedy because I’ve just read in the paper that the great Glenda Jackson has passed away and, in the spirit of the Fringe,” - I had a real tear came out of my eye at this point - “I’d like to ask for one minute’s silence for a great actress.”

And they did.

Silence.

A whole minute.

I looked at my watch and the whole minute went by.

A long time.

Then Martin tugged my trousers and handed up my newspaper to me. I looked at it:

“Oh!” I said. “Not *Glenda* Jackson. *Wendy* Jackson. A pensioner from Sydenham..... Doesn’t matter then, does it?”

The tent fell even more silent than during the Minute’s Silence.

After a pause, a thespian in the front just looked up at me and theatrically projected the words:

“Bad taste!”

The ironic thing was that he was wearing a pink and green shirt at the time.

This was the beginning - 1982 - of a beautiful, long-running relationship between the Edinburgh Fringe and me.

We went back to Edinburgh the next year - back to The Hole in The Ground - and this time Circuit had *three* tents. They *loved* a tent. They had a big one in the middle, with a small one on one side and a medium one on the other. Like Daddy Tent, Mummy Tent and Little Baby Tent. You could pay to see one show and hear all three as the shows were running simultaneously.

We were in the Daddy Tent. Emma Thompson was in the little one with 'The Emma Thompson Band'. And, in the medium one, was this American creature called Eric Bogosian. He later starred in Oliver Stone's movie *Talk Radio*. I never got on with him. He was a prima donna. He upset everyone. He upset Emma Thompson. She was in tears and I boldly told him to leave her alone.

All the arguments and artistic friction came about because of the clash of noise.

What we tried to arrange was to perform all our noisy bits at the same time and all our quiet bits at the same time, so the audiences wouldn't get too distracted. But Eric was having none of it. One part of his show had Heavy Metal music - very loud - in our quiet bit. His show was called *Funhouse - An Anarchistic Romp Through The American Way of Life*. So, I thought, well at least he's a bit of an anarchist. He'll like a laugh, won't he?

Our show that year started with me entering on a tractor. I tried to leap over ten toy cars but, of course, the tractor went off the ramp and squashed the cars. Good opening. We had persuaded the manager of a local garden centre to lend us the tractor for free and we advertised his business. He was a typical dour Scot and was in the audience with his family the night I decided to visit Eric Bogosian.

We had had about six days of Eric's Heavy Metal music coming through into our show, so I decided to go and see Eric in his tent. During a performance.

It came to the part of our show where Eric was making a hell of a row with his heavy metal tape. I screamed at our audience to make myself heard above the noise:

“Look, we’ll go and see Eric. All of us. He’ll like it. He’s a bit of a laugh. He’s an anarchist.”

I jumped on the tractor, naked. The stages were flat. So I drove out of our tent on the tractor and straight in to his tent and onto his stage. Our audience followed behind the tractor.

“Hello, Eric!” I said.

He was swaying backwards and forwards, ‘air-guitaring’ with a broom handle in his hands and he was going “Brrrrmmmmmm!” to this AC/DC track that was coming out of the loudspeakers. Very witty, I presume.

When he saw me in the nude on the tractor followed by all our audience, he stopped performing and flopped in a chair that was at the back of the stage. We all filed past, then came out of his tent and back into our own and thought no more about it.

After about two minutes, I heard the sound of a tractor being smashed up with a sledge-hammer. Then I heard, round the back, all the dressing-rooms being smashed up. Then he came running in. By this time, Martin Soan was naked and I had clothes on. Eric saw Martin and thought it was me. So he hit Martin and knocked him over and then ran out screaming. Martin got up and carried on, because we’ve had worse than that.

The next day, all hell was let loose with the Circuit lot. Eric claimed it was all my fault. Well, I suppose it *was*, really. They fined us £800 because we had to pay for the refunds to all the people who walked out of his show. I found out later that this included all the people who’d walked out of his show even before the tractor episode.

So I was bitter again. We were still living in tents and he had this house with thick carpets and I was made to go and apologise and I did *a bit*.

Two years after the tractor episode in Edinburgh, I was sitting at home in Greenwich watching Channel 4 and heard the announcer say:

“Appearing live at nine at The Albany Empire on *Loose Talk* - Eric Bogosian”.

The Albany Empire was about two miles from where I was sitting. So I thought *I'll go and see Eric again!*

I have a mate called Mad Mick who works for a fork-lift truck company, so I phoned him up and said:

“Can I borrow a fork-lift truck because I have a friend who’s on at The Albany Empire and I want to go and pay a visit?”

“Alright,” he said.

So I got the fork-lift truck and drove to The Albany. It takes about 20 minutes in a fork-lift truck. I poised myself outside The Albany at 9 o’clock, ready to go in.

I took my clothes off.

Then, dead on 9 o’clock - whoosh - straight in with fork-lift truck. Into The Albany.

But I had got the night wrong and it was an aerobics class for the Over-50s.

The Fringe gets to you after a while. It makes you do funny things. The funniest thing I ever heard in Edinburgh involved a coach driver.

It was the end of the Eighties and I was a bit depressed, because it was the third or fourth week of the Fringe. Everyone gets the Fringe Blues around then. You've done two or three weeks of constant shows and drinking and going to The Gilded Balloon after your own show and partying. So I went out, semi-depressed, one cold Edinburgh day - and that IS cold - and saw one of those open-topped tourist buses.

Downstairs, it was full with old age pensioners smelling of urine, so I sat upstairs. It was a pleasant tour and the driver had a microphone giving all the old tourist nonsense:

"On the right there's the Castle and on the left is where wee Rabbie Burns..." and so on until, halfway along Princes Street, a car cut him up and he forgot about the microphone. So then it was:

"On the right there's the Castle and Fuck off ya fuckin' bastard! Ya fuckin' cunt!" coming all over the coach.

Pity I wasn't downstairs. But I could imagine the faces of all these pensioners sitting there hearing all this coming across. I just sat upstairs on my own laughing in the cold.

Arthur Smith does his own guided tour of Edinburgh every year on the last Saturday night of the Fringe and I'm always on it. It lasts from four o'clock on the Sunday morning to seven o'clock or arrest by the police, whichever comes first. On the Sunday night, I always perform in my London club. So, I'm always paralytic but have to get the 9.00am Sunday train to London which always takes longer than the normal five hours.

After one of Arthur Smith's tours, I ended up in a hotel with a well-known older journalist who used to be the Fashion Editor of *Vogue* - she was about 52 and I was about 38. Wizo came and woke me up at eight in the morning to get the train. When I got on the train. I was absolutely shagged-out and luckily got a carriage where I was all to myself. I sat down and thought *This is it! I'm going to go to sleep*. But, just as I did, a group of Scottish football supporters came on the train because there was a game down in London. About 200 of them, all with cans of lager, all shouting:

"Ye bastards! Ya English bastards!"

Then the traditional crying baby arrived.

On his tour, Arthur Smith offers various sums of money to various people along the route to do various things. You might have to climb up the top of a lamp-post and sing *Scotland The Brave*. I've somehow always got involved in getting £25 for standing on something naked and singing *Scotland The Brave*.

The police have been called quite often, but what Arthur Smith doesn't know - until he reads this - is that three times I've called the police myself. I've used the phone box halfway down The Royal Mile, saying there's a madman on the loose. Once I even got arrested as Arthur Smith in the road outside The Gilded Balloon. Arthur was in the same group of us going off somewhere. I was peeing up against the wall and the police stopped me and said:

"Right! we're arresting you for urinating in a public place. Name and address!"

So I said: "Brian Smith (Arthur's real name)" and gave his address.

And I've never heard from them since. I don't know if he has.

Most people pay to get into shows at the Edinburgh Fringe. I don't encourage this. The thing to do is to get plastic sheaths from a stationers, get a bit of card, get a bit of Letraset and write PRESS on the card in big letters, then REVIEWER in smaller letters, then your name at the bottom. You put the card inside the plastic sheath and then get access to a laminating machine if you can - if not, a domestic iron does just the same thing. You press down on the card inside the plastic, it's laminated, you've got a Press Card and you just go in anywhere with it.

I did a similar thing with The Snakebite Award.

The Perrier Award has been awarded at the Edinburgh Fringe for about ten years. It is given to the best comedy/cabaret performance and it's run by a woman with the unfortunate name of Nica Burns. Unfortunate, because 'Nica' is pronounced 'Knicker'.

Well, it can be if you feel like it.

My Snakebite Award was the opposite of The Perrier Award. It was an award for the *worst* cabaret. I laminated up a few cards, gave them to a few of my pals and we just went in any show we wanted for nothing. I went to see a Japanese opera at the Playhouse Theatre. I didn't understand a word. But I didn't have to pay to see it.

The Snakebite Award had a £500, and later a £1000, First Prize which was a bit of a problem. So it almost always had to awarded to someone I knew well or someone who I knew wouldn't ask for the £1000. I won it a couple of times; Chris Luby from *The Mad Show* has won it; and the London Hospital Medical School won it the first two years running, once with a show called *Jean De Toilette*, which is the worst show I have ever seen.

They did a musical number called *Flush Gordon* to the music of Freddie Mercury and Queen. At this point in the plot, the hero, Jean, was sitting on a toilet cleaning his teeth with a lavatory brush, surrounded by a bevy of nurses in stockings and suspenders. Someone else sang a song about

lentils while members of the cast went into the audience scattering lentils. I watched it with a bloke called Tristram Davies from the *Independent* who said it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. We couldn't stop laughing, but we were laughing *at* rather than *with*. We almost had to be carried out. The venue was the lecture theatre of a mental hospital in Morningside, on the outskirts of Edinburgh, and it was packed. It was a Monday and there were about 300 people there. My show was right in the middle of town and I was performing to about 30 people each night. Proves something, though exactly what I don't know.

For their first win, I gave The London Hospital Medical School a £500 cheque that bounced and they were happy with that. Then I felt guilty because they *are* a hospital, so I went and did a gig at the London Hospital I was supposed to be getting £500 for and gave them the fee.

A lot of people thought and think 'alternative' comedy' like some poetry, preaches to people or is doing some worthwhile job in a vaguely Left Wing way.

But I remember playing a small place called The Comedy Boom at the Edinburgh Fringe in the mid-Eighties. I was compering a show featuring musical comedy group Skint Video, comic/poet John Hegley and Sensible Footwear, a three-woman feminist group. The landlady's daughter was about 23 and watched every show because she was there clearing glasses up. She laughed very loudly and genuinely at each show. I used to do a joke competition where members of the audience submitted their own jokes and, after about a week of this, she came up to me and said:

"I've got a joke for you".

The joke was something about "a nigger with a parrot on his shoulder".

She thought I could actually get up on stage and tell that joke after watching a week's worth of right-on 'alternative' comedy.

CHAPTER 18: PAULA YATES AND A TIRADE OF ABUSE

Once, in Edinburgh, Jerry Sadowitz was asked to perform five minutes on the *Pick of The Fringe* programme on BBC TV Scotland. Michael Leggo was directing it. I hadn't met him since we were childhood neighbours in Lewisham. When I turned up, Arnold Brown was remonstrating with Jerry, who was refusing to go on. We cajoled him and threatened him

and, in the end, he agreed to do it only if he could do what he wanted because he was obviously going to be heavily censored. They filmed his act with the *Cunts* and *Fucks* and everything in, then edited it with beeps. The result was like watching Jerry Sadowitz but listening to jokes in Morse Code.

The first year I took Jerry up to Edinburgh, his advert in the Fringe Programme was something like:

**JERRY SADOWITZ - GLASWEGIAN COMIC MAGICIAN.
A MAN WHO'S HAD HIS ACT
COMPLETELY RIPPED-OFF BY BING HITLER.**

Bing Hitler was the stage name of Craig Ferguson.

Jerry had told everyone about Bing Hitler ripping-off his act and I quite sincerely believed it.

Craig Ferguson was up there in Edinburgh, being represented by Vivienne Clore, a big high-powered agent who later became my agent. Craig wanted to sue the Fringe Society and Jerry for libel, which meant I was going to be sued because it was me who'd put the advert in. As I dug deeper into it, I couldn't find one example where Craig Ferguson had actually nicked any line.

They'd started off at around the same time at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow and, at the time, Craig Ferguson was doing witty songs on the guitar. Possibly Craig was influenced by Jerry's style and started doing things where he said: *I hate this...* and *I hate that....* but that was as near as it got.

Craig Ferguson had a record out as Bing Hitler and there wasn't one line of Jerry's on it. He would have won his case but what was decided in the end was that the Fringe Society fined Jerry and he didn't get his Fringe Club ticket money, which upset him greatly. I think it would have been about £1500.

I arranged a meeting between the two of them at which Craig said he didn't do it for the money and he agreed to give the money to a charity of Jerry's choice.

I took Jerry up to the Edinburgh Fringe twice. He's a Glaswegian, so he hates Edinburgh because of that. Or, at least, he feels and sounds Glaswegian.

CHAPTER 19: A LUCKY LIMP

The Tunnel was very successful so, from 1986, I decided to try to take the idea to the Edinburgh Festival and I called the show *Aaaaaaaaaaargh!* because, with all those 'A's I'd get first place in the Fringe Programme. Once, I had to have 26 'A's, when someone tried to catch up - The Aaaaaaaaaaaaaardvark Theatre Company.

One year, we were playing at The Pleasance venue and, as normal, when you open the first week there's no-one there. All the other shows at The Pleasance had been reviewed by *The Scotsman* newspaper. Again, we were 'wrong side of the tracks'. They hadn't come to review our show. I was feeling bitter. So I thought I'd write my own review for them.

I got a copy of *The Scotsman* and picked out a reviewer's name at random - William Cook. I talked to someone I knew who *used* to write reviews for *The Scotsman* and found out how to do it. All you do is type it out in double-spacing. That's the trick.

Then, with Arthur Smith, I wrote a review of my own show, put William Cook's name at the bottom, folded it up, put it in an envelope and went to the *Scotsman's* offices at about 9.00pm when all the staff had gone home and gave it to the porter. Sure enough, next day, they printed it. After that, the show was full up.

Then *The Scotsman* went mad because someone told them I'd done it and William Cook didn't speak to me for years. I don't know why. I presume he got paid for it.

One problem about Edinburgh which I forget every year until I arrive is that the audiences there tend to just sit and look at you. A lot of people just come along and stare and don't react. I don't know what it is. They're just 'Edinburgh Festival Goers'.

It's not that they are surprised or shocked by my act in particular. I have seen it with other acts who go down a storm elsewhere but an Edinburgh audience just sit there staring. I've had audiences stare blankly at me for two weeks in Edinburgh, then I came back to London on the Sunday

night, did Up The Creek and they showed they enjoyed me. I felt much better.

Edinburgh audiences don't heckle the acts like they do in London. They just sit and stare, which can be worse than heavy heckling.

CHAPTER 21: A FIREWORK UP MY BUM

One of the most popular acts with any Tunnel audience that enjoyed General De Gaulle was Chris Lynam, who had been so kind to me when Pip was ill.

He was in The Greatest Show on Legs at one point and we were all sitting round saying:

“How can we follow The Balloon Dance? We're all naked. What can we do? We just have to walk off stage. There's no way to finish it!”

“Well,” I said, “You might as well stick a banger up your arse!”

“Good idea!” Chris said: “You do it!”

So I was the first one to do it. But I only did it once.

You don't actually stick the banger *up* your arse, you just clench it between your buttocks, then light it. I didn't have the necessary muscle-control. It drooped a bit and set light to the hairs on my testicles. I said to Chris:

“You'd better do it”.

So now the finish to his act involves putting a firework up his bottom, then an extravagant version of *There's No Business Like Show Business* starts playing on loudspeakers, the firework is lit, goes off and he exits the stage trailing glorious sparks. Sometimes it's a three-stage Roman Candle shooting forth increasingly spectacular jets of silver sparkles. Good finish. Difficult to follow.

The first year he did it in Edinburgh, we were playing a little pub called The Comedy Boom. It wasn't very big, but we got the Banger Up The Bum routine passed by a Fire Officer called Maurice Gibb. That's his real name. It just is. We did the routine the first night then the landlord said he wouldn't let us do it again. He said:

“You’re not doing *that* in *my* pub!”

I said we’d compromise. At the end of our show, we’d take the audience outside and do it in the street. So we did that the second night and it wasn’t just the audience from the show who were there: it drew a bit of a crowd. The landlord said:

“No! You’re not doing that again. It’s bringing my pub into disrepute!”

So we had to video the routine and show the audience the video and it wasn’t the same.

On the last night of our run, I decided we’d do it again for real. We’d been paid already, so fuck the landlord. I was sick of it. We’d had other rows about our act - obviously.

So Chris Lynam bought an extra-large firework.

That night - banger in the bottom - light it - *No Business Like Show Business* - and it set the pub alight. Just the wall. A bit of plaster. It wasn’t much damage. But some people.... moan, moan, moan.

The next year, *The Greatest Show on Legs* played *The Assembly Rooms*, *the* big, prestige venue at the Edinburgh Fringe. Same thing again. The Fire Officer passed it. First night went without a hitch. Lovely. On the second night, for some reason, it set off all the fire alarms in *The Assembly Rooms* and they had to evacuate the entire building - about 3000 people had to evacuate, including our audience and some Russians who were doing a four-hour play and only had three minutes left to go.

We were all standing around outside *The Assembly Rooms* - a motley crew - when the fire engines turned up with Maurice Gibb. He was there, ready with the hose. Then he saw me naked, saw Chris Lynam, and said:

“Banger up the bum?”.

“Yes,” I said.

“Hoses away, lads!” he said.

And off they went.

The Russians - fair play to them - went back upstairs and did the last three minutes of their play.

CHAPTER 25: TWO PARAMEDICS LOOKED AT EACH OTHER

As usual, I was compering in the Comedy Tent at Glastonbury and the last act on was a bloke called UltraVision who, basically, was a juggler. But he used dayglo luminous paint on his props. So, if you were watching in the dark and you'd had a bit of dope, it must have looked quite good.

Personally, I thought it was bollocks and I was thinking along those lines in the dressing room at the back where he kept all his dayglo paint. The comedian Sean Lock walked by and I said:

"Here, Sean, do us a favour, can you paint my knob?"

So he did. I ended up with a yellow dayglo knob and red testicles. He painted little red circles on my nipples. And my belly-button was a yellow circle.

When UltraVision finished his act, I went on and said:

"Thankyou very much ladies and gentlemen. That was UltraVision. Twenty five years of Glastonbury. My tribute....."

Someone turned out the lights and put on a Bon Jovi record. I took my clothes off and I was away. I threw one of his clubs around, threw some of his dayglo confetti up in the air, started having a wank and walked off. That night, I dreamt I had some sort of sex with Mrs Hardee and we went off to one of those Rave Tents with ultraviolet lights and she was going around looking like Al Jolson.

The dayglo testicles also proved a useful addition to my act in Edinburgh that year. It was the climax of my show, which lost £4000: the first time I had ever lost money on the Fringe.

1995 was, all round, a year of near death and destruction.

It was the year the *Observer* sent a young bloke called Sam Taylor to review the comedy on the Fringe. But he knew nothing about the comedians or the history of it or anything. He was going to do the normal press thing of going along to the ones that the big agents had sent press

releases for. My wife Jane's brother-in-law is a photographer for the *Observer*, so I was introduced to Sam Taylor and I said:

"You can come and review my show, if you like".

"Do you know anything about Edinburgh?" he asked me, not realising I was the self-styled King of The Fringe.

I didn't get on with him very well although, fair enough, he did eventually turn up for my show. But he turned up about three days before the last night and, because the *Observer* publishes on a Sunday, the review was not going to come out until after our show had finished its run. So it was no use to us.

He hadn't seen the show so I explained to him that I did a bit of fake karate in which I got a volunteer to hold a bit of wood. He said he'd do that. So during the show - I'd never done this before - I said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I used to do a bit of karate and I'd like a volunteer from the audience to hold this plank of wood".

He came up and held it and I did all the karate-style moves and then just ran towards him and kneed him in the bollocks.

He fell down and crawled off the stage.

I went up to the microphone and said:

"Sorry. I haven't done that for a long time".

He crawled up the stairs out of the venue and the bloke at the door asked him:

"Did you enjoy the show?"

"No," he said.

"Are you going to give Malcolm a good review?"

"No," he said.

And, sure enough he didn't. He said I was a balding, myopic lunatic. I wasn't that myopic when I kneed him in the bollocks, though.

In Edinburgh, I was performing with Ricky Grover and The Bastard Son of Tommy Cooper.

I'm not Ricky Grover's agent, just helping him. I advised him to sign with the Avalon agency for one year. But they are now signing everyone up for five years, which sounds a bit like a sentence to me.

The Edinburgh Fringe is now working on the Supermarket Theory. You get big agents like Avalon and Off The Kerb who go up there with about 15 or 20 shows like a conveyor belt of comedy. I normally went up there with one or possibly two shows. I'm like the little corner shop to their supermarkets. I supply the quality but don't necessarily get the customers in.

Ricky Grover is a bit like a male Jo Brand.

When she started performing as The Sea Monster, nearly all Jo's material was about being fat. She still gets accused of that but, in fact, very little of her material is now about being fat. A lot of Ricky Grover's material *is* about being fat.

I took him to the Edinburgh Fringe in 1995 but, as he said afterwards, it wasn't really his sort of audience. He'd prefer to play the more mainstream Circus Tavern in Purfleet, Essex, near the M25. He says he likes 'thick' people like himself (his description, not mine). He goes down particularly well in Southend.

In the main, the Edinburgh audience just came in and sat and stared at Ricky Grover. He almost lost his confidence. You do, if you haven't been in the game long and people just sit and stare at you.

I put him on with The Bastard Son of Tommy Cooper, whose real name is Sebastian. His father is Sicilian and his mother is English. He is small and wiry and speaks with a Welsh accent, because he was brought up in Swansea. Most people just sat there and stared at him, too. But he is not an act for the squeamish. We had a couple walk out because they said they felt sick.

He's basically a sword-swallower, but he trained as a musician. He went to Dartington College. There are three bits to Dartington: a drama bit, a

music bit and a 'progressive' school. After he left the music bit, he learned to be a sword-swallower. It takes about a year to have your gullet open up enough so you can poke a sword down it. You have to practise every day for about a year.

When I took him up to the Edinburgh Fringe with Ricky Grover, The Bastard Son of Tommy Cooper - or 'The Bastard' as we called him - was getting fed up with his relationship with his girlfriend. Halfway through the Fringe, he phoned her up in London to say it was all over. We asked how the conversation went and he said:

"Oh, she took it quite well".

This was at about 2.00pm. At 5.00pm, she was on the phone again and he was sheepish talking to her. Then she phoned again about five minutes later and, after that, he decided to put on the answerphone and pretend he was out.

We were all in the kitchen when the phone rang again and we heard her slightly Welsh voice on the machine saying:

"I'm going to tell the whole world what this Bastard's like, what he's done to me".

So we all stood there in the kitchen listening. Ricky Grover, me, Steve Bowditch and The Bastard, who was looking sheepish.

"Before he left for Edinburgh," her voice continued. "He smashed up the kitchen. He broke the living room window. And he kicked me in the cunt."

Then she slammed the phone down.

Ricky said: "What was wrong with that? That's what I do with my wife if she don't get me breakfast on time. I thought I was going to hear something good like you were a paedophile!"

About three days later, I was rounding off our show on stage. I got to the words:

".....and let's have a big round of applause for The Bastard Son of Tommy Cooper,"

and I heard the meow of a cat.

I thought this was a bit strange. I mentioned The Bastard again and the cat meowed again. I couldn't see where the cat noise was coming from, but we ended the show with no problems.

At the Fringe, you have to pack up very fast to let the next performers prepare for their show.

When the lights went up, there The Bastard's girlfriend stood, in front of the stage, holding a rather worried cat, saying:

"He's a bastard!"

There was also a woman from Latvia there - just a member of the audience. She wanted to take photos of me, Ricky and The Bastard to show her friends back home. We were trying to clear up and get out as quickly as possible, while this massive argument started between The Bastard and his girlfriend. The woman from Latvia was trying to get us into a group for a photo involving the three of us plus her and her boyfriend.

The Bastard's girlfriend was called Louise, so I said:

"Nice cat, Louise".

"Yes," she said. "And he's got very sharp claws".

With this, she threw the cat at The Bastard. The cat flew through the air and scratched me on the shoulder as it screeched towards him.

"Well," I said, "You'd better sort this out outside".

I shovelled Louise, the Bastard and the cat into the street. We packed everything up but the Latvian woman then started screaming about the photos. My friend Maurice Gibb, the fireman, had been in the audience and looks a bit like The Bastard Son of Tommy Cooper - or at least he was the nearest I could get at the time. So I got Maurice to pose for the photos with Ricky Grover and me. And the Latvian woman never noticed the difference.

That night, Louise and her cat started staying in our Edinburgh flat. Things got a bit tense - Louise wasn't speaking to any of us and the cat was a bit neurotic. Which, I suppose, is not surprising.

After about four or five days of this, I came home with Jane and told The Bastard that Ricky Grover was a bit upset. He'd said "Hello" to Louise that morning and she'd completely ignored him.

Then Louise came back and went completely mad and ranted on and on about The Bastard being a bastard and called Ricky Grover a pimp and said Jane was "a Man-Pleaser". Jane was quite flattered.

At this point, Ricky started going mad about being called a pimp, because he said he'd only ever worked in a brothel and he'd never been a pimp and his little kid was in the flat with us. It was two in the morning and The Bastard was crying, so things came to a bit of a head. Jane told The Bastard and Louise they'd have to leave the next morning or, if they kept at it, they'd have to leave immediately. Louise stormed out, shouting:

"I'm going to go to the papers!"

"I wish you would," I said. "We could do with the publicity".

After she'd left, The Bastard came in a bit tearful and asked us:

"Can you feed the cat for Louise?"

Feed the cat? We'd have fed a lion to get rid of Louise.

She went back to London and, when last heard of, she had moved to a caravan in Devon and started having therapy.

The next night, having rid ourselves of the disastrous Louise, we went to a Latin American club for a bit of relaxation. I left alone at about 2 o'clock after someone at the club gave me three Ecstasy tablets. I went back to our flat and took one. I thought I'd give it a go and see what happened. I had had one a long time ago at the Glastonbury Festival and it had been alright there, out in the fields. But, this time, the effect was completely different.

Jane arrived back at our flat with some lunatic bloke who'd heard I had three tabs of Ecstasy. He wanted some, so I sold him one and made a profit. They were going off to a Rave and I said:

"I'll come!"

But I was in my dressing gown at the time and, by the time I'd got ready, they'd bugged off and I couldn't remember the address where the Rave was. So I was left in the flat alone and I took another half tab of Ecstasy.

The effect of Ecstasy is to make your heart beat faster so I just wandered about the flat like a lunatic with my heart thumping madly and then I thought:

"That's it! I'm going to die!"

So I lay down on the bed.

Jane got back at about 6.30 in the morning and I said:

"I'm going to die. I'm definitely going to have a heart attack."

She tried to be all calm and said: "You're not. Just breathe properly."

"I am!" I said: "I'm going to have a heart attack! Definitely!"

My heart seemed to be beating faster and faster and I was just getting more and more paranoid. I told Jane:

"You've got to phone an ambulance! You've got to phone an ambulance!"

And, eventually, she did.

"They're on their way, aren't they?" I asked: "I'm definitely going to die!"

Panic is the word.

Panic.

According to Jane I was lying there on the bed fiddling with my genitals with my pants on, but I don't remember that.

I was panicking about the ambulance not arriving.

After what seemed like a lifetime, the doorbell rang.

"Thank God!" I said. "They're here!"

It was the postman.

Eventually two blokes *did* arrive in green paramedic gear. Apparently my pulse rate was 30 beats over, which isn't bad. They said they'd had people with 150 over who still lived, but they had to take me to hospital just in case. They had a chair with wheels on it to take me down the stairs. They sat me in that and put a blanket over me and tied me in. I looked like Hannibal Lector from *Silence of The Lambs*. It was the most frightening thing I've ever experienced in my life. They took me down two darkened flights of stairs tied to this chair.

I told them I'd taken a tab and a half of Ecstasy - they don't have to report it to the police - and a fair amount of drink. I found out later it was the drink that caused the problem.

In the ambulance, one of them asked Jane how old I was and she said:

"Forty five".

"He should be old enough to know better," he said.

Then they asked Jane: "Is he his normal colour?"

"He is now," she said, " But he looked a bit grey earlier on".

I pulled my oxygen mask down and said:

"But I've got luminous testicles!"

The two paramedics looked at each other and I looked at them and I said:

"But I have! I have!"

I pulled my trousers down and my testicles were painted in dayglo paint because it was all part of the show. They thought I was mad.

But they took me to hospital and it was like having an MOT. They did all the tests and said I was remarkable for a man of my age. Later that day, I felt fine. We did a good show that night and I went out again until about 4.00am.

Ricky Grover also had trouble, though.

On his very first night, the show went well and, afterwards, we did what a lot of performers do after their shows - we went to The Gilded Balloon. There's a show there called *Late'n'Live* but, basically, all you do is hang around in the bar and talk bollocks.

An excellent performer called Ian Cognito was there and he was very drunk, as is his wont. When he's drunk, he gets aggressive. Part of his Italian upbringing, I think.

Ricky had worked with him before, so said hello to him and Cognito grabbed him by his collar and said:

"You're a fat cunt!"

Ricky doesn't mind that sort of thing at all. He's used to it.

So, not getting a reaction, Cognito continued:

"You're a fat cunt and you're not funny!"

Ricky still didn't react, so Cognito added:

"And your wife's a fat cunt as well!"

This upset Ricky, because he's one of those traditional people.

"Did you mean that?" he asked.

"Yeah," Ian Cognito said.

"Can you repeat it?" Ricky asked.

Cognito said: "Your wife's a fat cunt".

And, with one blow, Ricky just knocked him out. Unconscious. Displaced his jaw a bit. The lot. Ricky's a professional, so he knows exactly where to hit someone.

Standing three or four yards away was Jon Thoday, who runs the Avalon agency. I looked over at Jon and said:

"Oh, have you got that £500 you owe me?"

Funnily enough, the cheque arrived in the post about two days later.