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IMY PURE FUNNY

TONY LAW

Tony Law is one of the best-known stand-ups in the land. A regular face on our telly boxes and a spinner of hilariously absurd yarns and surreal off-the-cuff tales. Col Howarth chats to the great Canadian himself ahead of his performance in South Wales as part of the Rhondda Arts Festival in Treorchy, about overcoming difficult times and his hard-fought voyage of rediscovery.



photo credit: Storm Davison

'So Wolfy just had his balls off not long ago. SORRY I CAN'T HELP YOU OUT! Wolfy sort that fucker out. DON'T GIVE A FUCK MATE!'

Tony Law is chatting over the phone from his car somewhere in Islington. His beloved Black German Shepherd Wolfy is in the back, and it seems is a couple of nads lighter, and not in the mood to protect the man who was instrumental in making that happen.

'I just had a dude come up to me saying I've just got out of prison can you help me? I'm sitting in my fucking car. Wolfy just sat there. He should have gone nuts!'

At the point where Tony shouts at the guy a jogger runs past my car in Cardiff where I'm sitting recording this interview. On hearing his Canadian tones belting out through my speakers the jogger breaks into a petrified sprint. There goes a guy who thinks I've just shouted from my car that I can't help him out and dont give a fuck!

'The conversation just went from us talking about our kids to having a guy telling me he just got out of prison. It made me rage! I'd be him if I didn't have family around me. Now the mist has gone down I'm Captain Liberal again haha! Although I'll have to move the car in case he breaks into it later.'

It's already late as we've both been reading our kids to sleep: both on dad duties, keeping up to date on each other's progress by text before heading out to our cars 180 miles apart. How was tonight's read?

'I only read stuff that I'm interested in now. They hear my voice and it makes them fall asleep anyway so it doesn't really matter. So I'm reading a book about 50 huge titans from history. I keep adding in *it's all bullshit by the way, haha!*

Tony Law is one of the most highly acclaimed acts in the UK, much loved by critics, peers and audiences alike. His brand of stand-up is surreal, absurd, chaotic and off-the-cuff: as unique as the moment in which it is performed and impossible to define. He has been described as a careering train of thoughts, a fiercely intelligent maniac, and he said in 2016 that it was his wish to make a solid hour of comedy where his audience is laughing but doesn't have a clue as to why.

Originally from Alberta, Canada, Tony's interest in performing stand-up didn't really materialise until after he moved to London age 19, where he saw first-hand that it was a viable profession in a burgeoning industry. This would have been about 1987. Before that it would have been all about the Monty Python videos.

'It's like a cliché but Monty Python really did change my life. It really spoke to me. I was like *that's what comedy can be*. It blew my mind. It made me cry I was so overwhelmed with joy when I watched it. I'd never even heard of them before. The more bizarre it was the better. I'm now introducing my own kids to it. Its wonderful.

'I did the new act competition at Glastonbury in 1995 and I won that. But then I just kind of lost the thread and didn't really come back, just working odd jobs, driving garbage trucks and that kind of thing.

'I guess it was about 2000 when I started doing it again. Then I really started concentrating and doing it properly from about 2006 onwards. Any way you look at it it's been a long time.'

Did stand-up come naturally?

'No. I never had the confidence. Growing up on a farm being a farm boy it just didn't seem possible.

'Certainly it was at the back of my mind. I'd always loved comedy and was always the funny guy in my groups of friends and we were funny fuckers in high school, but it didn't seem like you could ever do a job from it.

'It was only from being in London for a long time that I thought *shit this exists*. I would hate myself if I didn't try. But confidence on stage took a lot of years. It probably took a decade until I felt remotely confident on stage. Some people get that quicker and I'm always resentful of those people. I was a slow bloomer when it came to being on stage.

'My style has evolved slowly. I've been overtaken by so many generations of comedians. I remember Russell Howard blowing past me. I remember Jimmy Carr started at the same time as me and I remember thinking *ah fuck*. Because I always knew I was funnier than those fuckers off stage, haha!

'But to get it across on stage I didn't have the level of belief and confidence. Micky Flanagan zipped past me!

'I haven't resented any of them. You've got to remember that there are only about 40 or 50 famous ones and the rest of us are the other thousands.'

A curious use of the words 'the rest of us' that, as Tony modestly includes himself among the 'other thousands' of unsung performers. A quick squizz at his credentials however reveals a raft of TV appearances, and a career that went stellar from around 2011 when he started hoovering up awards.

Buzzcocks, Have I Got News For You?, 8 Out of 10 Cats and Charlie Brooker's Weekly Wipe are among his TV credits. And the praise continues to pour in.

Of last year's show *Absurdity for the Common People*, The Times stated 'Chaos has rarely been so finely constructed and this much fun.' Chortle described 'A fine celebration of the absurd, full of laughs like no other.'

But a couple of years in and the train had started to shift off its rails and Tony would find himself clinging on.

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'2011 and 2012 were breakthrough years. But what happened was I started to get a sniff of success and it looked like things were going to go really easy for me and that's when I started drinking heavily. Because I didn't think on some level like I deserved it.

'So the alcoholism really kicked in, and to try to keep myself sober I started taking substances secretly but actually that did really contribute to my downfall and sped up my alcoholism. By 2015 I was a frikken mess haha!

'And that's when I stopped drinking.

'So 2011-2013 were good, but what's funny is that those years were a result of the previous 5 years where drink wasn't a problem. Through the innocence and decency of those years I built up a real head of steam and the more successful I got the more I threw it away. It's a bloody shame.'

But flash forward to the here and now and congratulations are in order. Three years dry and Tony is feeling and looking good. His Facebook page is full of clips of him walking Wolfy in the open air, surrounded by fields and streams, or driving with him in the back of the car. Tony looks relaxed and content. Fresher and happier.

How has being dry affected your writing?

'The first year of being dry was very difficult as I didn't know who I was and I was super depressed all the time. Then the second year got better. I suddenly thought I was going to get quite mainstream but if anything it's got a little more bizarre! I'm certainly a lot more fun as a performer. For those first couple of sober years I didn't have much confidence. I was just working out how to do it again. I was like a different person. Now its more fun than its ever been and I'm funnier than I ever was by a mile. I think sober Tony would have dealt with success a lot better than drinking Tony did.

'I've got the best following that I could ever dream of. They are just kind of nice people. They are the ones that stuck with me. That's what keeps you going I tell you. When you're struggling one week and you've got all these nice people coming over telling you *Tone, we like the kind of shit you're peddling!* And you walk away connected to humanity and it makes you perform harder the next night. They all have open minds. That's the connecting thread I think.

'My live stuff has gone from strength-to-strength. I'm getting closer to my pure funny. There's a heart to it. It might be absurdity and surrealism but there's a heart underneath it and it means more than what is being said literally.'

At the time of writing Tony is working on a new show for this year's Edinburgh Fringe: *A Lost Show*.

'I was going back through some of my stuff picking through my past from around 2013. I couldn't find a set list from that year and never recorded it. I found one prop from that show and am trying to piece together what I was doing then. It's a bit about memory recovery and ultimately about moving on. But its all buried underneath what is essentially more new crazy stand up for me.'

Before the Edinburgh Fringe Tony is heading to the Rhondda Arts Festival in Treorchy to take part in a comedy extravaganza which will see some of the biggest names in stand-up grace the stage at The Lion, which by the way looks absolutely stunning (above opposite). All four shows will be hosted by Porth's very own Drew Taylor, and each will also include a cast of brilliant supporting acts.

Tony. Do you have any words for the people of Treorchy?

'Sure! The more love you give him the more he gives back!'

www.mrtonylaw.com

