

Comedy

Poking the modern malaise

If everyone put down their phones, the world would be happier, says Dylan Moran of *Off the Hook*

Zane Henry

Bernard Black is to blame, really. Dylan Moran's performance as the curmudgeonly protagonist in British observational comedy series *Black Books* was so effective that it has conjured up an indelible image of the Irish comedian as an irascible, perpetually hungover misanthrope. Which, it turns out, is inaccurate.

Talking to Moran early on a blustery London morning after he's just finished the United Kingdom leg of his new tour, *Off the Hook*, you'd expect him to be full of bile and misery. But he just sounds like a nice middle-aged guy who is halfway through his biggest tour in years and is tired. The fact that he's been doing lots of press interviews and answering the same questions over and over probably isn't helping.

"Journalists tend to ask questions I can't answer because they overanalyse and overthink things," he says. "They come from the outside of a situation with a fresh perspective and I'm caught up on the messy inside. I understand why they do it and that they have a job to do but it can

become brain-numbing being asked the same questions incessantly. Did you always know you were funny? When did you decide to do comedy? Did you ever want to do anything else? Are you going to do any more episodes of *Black Books*?"

Still, he seems genuinely excited about visiting South Africa for the first time when he performs at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. The first part of the interview is spent answering his many questions about South Africa.

"Are people very angry with Zuma about Nkandla?" (Yes) "Is he going to pay back the money?" (No) "How are women treated in South Africa?" (A lot of room for improvement) "What is Grahamstown like?" (Cold and struggling with a postcolonial hangover but it has a decent Steers) "Are South Africans hopeful that integration and progress are possible?" (Most of the time).

"When I was growing up in Ireland, supermarkets were refusing to sell South African oranges," he says. "So we were aware of apartheid to some extent. Then there was the World Cup where we got to experience a full blast of South African culture. I think people over here are

aware of the country's incredible expressiveness and joy, but there's also the poverty and crime. From my very limited perspective it seems to be a country of extremes. I'm thrilled that I'll have the opportunity to come over and meet the people and form my own opinions."

Moran was born in London in 1971 and moved to Ireland with his family when he was two years old. He started flirting with stand-up comedy when he was in his teens, before truly committing to it in 1992 at the tiny Dublin Comedy Cellar. Early acclaim saw him performing at international comedy festivals as well as a string of increasingly well-received one-man shows. He also got small parts in TV and film (his cameo as Rufus, the thief who sticks books down his trousers in the 1999 film *Notting Hill*, stole the scene from Hugh Grant's floppy-haired diffidence). He has since appeared in a number of films, including *Shaun of the Dead*, *Run Fatboy Run* and *Calvary*.

A cup of comedy:
Dylan Moran

But it was the sitcom *Black Books* that really made him famous. Moran played the acerbic, alcoholic owner of the titular bookstore with a degree of conviction that smacked of autobiography. Moran contends that Bernard Black is merely a character, but there are distinct echoes of him in his stand-up comedy.

Moran's diatribes on the modern malaise are insouciant, absurdist and mordant; seemingly improvised and freewheeling but struck through with poetic flourishes that suggest tight rehearsing. His material takes in global politics, shifts in language, the accelerating decrepitude of his ageing body, the futility of sports and the crippling ennui that confronts one when opening the fridge at 3am on a Tuesday morning. You know: everyday, relatable stuff.

His latest show, *Off the Hook*, deals with modern society's addiction to technology and connectivity.

"When I see someone filming the show on a mobile phone, I gently advise them to put it away,"

he says. "It's for their own sake, so that they can be in the room and have a better time. I honestly believe that one of the quickest ways for humanity to become happier would be for everyone to just put the phone down. It would help to realise that distracting themselves will not make anything go away."

"If everybody just stopped, closed their eyes and took a breath for a minute every day, that would do the world a lot of good. People would be more aware of the consequences of their actions and so on. And hopefully realise that the essence of life is the same everywhere and that we're all going to die quite soon so we should be less shit to each other."

This borderline optimism seems miles away from the wine-fuelled nihilism of Bernard Black.

"I'm not Bernard Black," he says. "I don't hate people. And I'm not drunk nearly as much as people think I am. I have learned a few things over the years. There is no way of writing in a successful manner while drunk. It does seem like a good idea at the time."

Dylan Moran's *Off the Hook* runs at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown from July 3 to 5. The shows are sold out, but extra tickets are occasionally made available at nationalartsfestival.co.za

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