

BEN MILLER Interview

Funny Business



Opens at Guildford's Yvonne Arnaud Theatre on Thursday 24 October
Runs until Saturday 2 November prior to a West End transfer

Comedians and comedy actors are often supposed to be gloomy miserabilists when you meet them in real life but charming Ben Miller, star of *The Duck House*, gives the lie to this widespread belief. An hour's conversation with friendly Ben bubbles with wit and there are chuckles galore during the interview. And it was very much the quality of the script written by TV comedy stalwarts Dan Patterson and Colin Swash that clinched it for Ben when he was approached to play the central role of Robert Houston MP.

"The piece was so funny and the timing so perfect that I had to do it," says Ben. "There were many reasons why I wasn't looking to take on another play in the West End so soon after *The Ladykillers* because stage plays are hard work and require an enormous commitment for them to succeed. I had also had such a good experience with *The Ladykillers* that I didn't think that anything else could be as entertaining or as challenging. But as soon as I read Dan and Colin's script, I changed my mind."

The Duck House, as the title suggests, takes us back to that fateful night in 2009 when the MPs' expenses scandal first broke. Robert Houston, the character played by Ben, is ostensibly a Labour MP who, fearful of being turfed out by the voters at the impending General Election, has opted to defect to the Conservatives. The Tory high command has therefore decided to send one of the party grandees to see if Robert is "squeaky clean".

"I suppose that Robert is a bit of a champagne socialist, on the right wing of Labour, on the left wing of the Conservatives, floating somewhere around the Lib Dems," explains Ben. "I'm not sure if he has any principles but he's a completely political animal. He's joining the Tories because he wants to stay in power. He's not a bad person – a loveable rogue would be an accurate description of him – and you do feel a certain amount of empathy for him. From his point of view, the system of expenses has simply been part of the culture of Westminster and he has followed the rules, just like everybody else, although he has fully exploited them and now he has to get rid of the evidence."

There is nothing in Ben's background to suggest that this son of academic parents would decide to make his living as an actor and comedian, although Ben remembers the Miller household as being full of jokes and laughter and even when the Millers get together today much hilarity ensues. Yet

Ben showed remarkable strength of character when going up to Cambridge to read Natural Sciences. Rather than heading straight for the Footlights, Ben devoted the three years of his degree course to hard study with a devotion to his academic work unusual in a future performer.

“Science is, and remains, a big passion of mine” Ben points out. “For those three years, I was totally focused on the subject. I had to get the sciences out of my system and, besides, I was very interested in what was happening in physics at the time. I don’t feel in any way divided between comedy and science. For me, they are two sides of the same coin. Without wishing to sound pretentious or pseydy, I honestly believe that both comedy and science share a sceptical attitude to the world. They both want to find out what is real and they both want to cut things down to size. You want to find some kind of truth and both science and comedy are concerned with what is true. These days, however, science is more of a hobby of mine, just like Rod Stewart with his train-set.”

Ben has pursued his career as a performer with the same diligence which he brought to his university work. After the obligatory time spent with the Footlights, he teamed up with his comedy partner, the equally in-demand Alexander Armstrong, for a number of sketch-show series. He then moved seamlessly into comedy drama and then drama itself with a recurring role in ITV’s *Primeval*. The *Worst Week* franchise on the BBC showed Ben’s talents as a farceur in his role as the hapless fiancé trailing disaster through his starchy in-laws’ perfect lives. A third series of *Death in Paradise*, the sunkissed whodunits set in the Caribbean, will be shown in the New Year but Ben departs the programme, half-way through the season. He’s keeping tight-lipped about the fate of his character, the Scotland Yard detective who is buttoned-up both literally and metaphorically. To play the lead in a popular series shot under immaculately blue skies while back home in Blighty we’re shivering through another British winter would appear to be every actor’s dream job. So why did Ben decide to call it a day on such a successful show?

“Had I been a single man with no responsibilities, I’d have probably been doing series twelve by now,” laughs Ben. “But I was feeling really miserable so far away from my family. My elder son had started school and his brother was too young to join me on location. I’d have a very enjoyable time working during the day and then I’d go back to my hotel room and feel utterly depressed without the family. I couldn’t see myself doing another series and so I just decided to go. I couldn’t face doing it again but everybody including the BBC and Red Planet, who make the series, were very understanding.”

Not that Ben has been mooching around at home. He has two feature films awaiting release; *Molly Moon* and *What We Did on Our Holiday* with Billy Connolly and David Tennant. At the moment, there is nothing in the diary once *The Duck House* concludes its scheduled run but Ben is relaxed about the situation.

“What makes me say yes to something is really down to a mixture of factors. Who will I be working with? Can I learn a lot from them? It’s important for me to keep on learning. On *The Duck House*, I’m working with some highly experienced theatre actors and we have in our director, Terry Johnson, a man who is not only a master playwright – I loved his *Dead Funny* – but who is also a great analyst of the work. He can put a play on bricks, as it were, and he can get under it and see what needs to be done. It looks as if I’ll be learning a lot from *The Duck House*.”

Tickets for *The Duck House* are on sale now! You can book yours by calling the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre Box Office on (01483) 44 00 00 or by visiting the website at www.yvonne-arnaud.co.uk