

FREAKISHLY IN-

telligent hamsters, squirrels, and cats, charmingly malicious inanimate objects, and edifying historical tangents are the stuff of Eddie Izzard's comedy. Izzard is the hottest comic in Britain—*Monty Python's* John Cleese has called him “the funniest man in England,” and huge crowds (over 11,000 at Wembley Arena during his *Dress to Kill* tour) have seconded the opinion. The diverse references in his shows are deconstructed on fan sites as if each of his monologues were *The Waste Land*, and his bits are parroted as religiously in England as lines from *The Simpsons* are here:

“We stole countries with the cunning use of flags,” he riffs. “Yeah. Just sail around the world and stick a flag in. I claim India for Britain!” They go, “You can’t claim us—we live here! Five hundred million of us!” “Do you have a flag? No flag, no country.”

But these days, what Izzard wants most, he says, is to be a serious actor. To that end, he’s been starring opposite Victoria Hamilton, one of London’s most celebrated stage actresses, in *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, Peter Nichols’s bitterly funny 1967 drama about a couple with a severely handicapped daughter (the title’s namesake). The show comes to New York March 14.

Over several post-rehearsal glasses of wine with Hamilton one recent night at a midtown hotel bar, Izzard wondered what the Broadway audience would be like. When he took over the role of Bri (as in Brian) after matinee-idol Clive Owen (*Croupier*) left to make a movie, the audience for *Joe Egg* changed dramatically. “The curtain would come up to 200 people chanting *Ed-die! Ed-die!*” says Hamilton, laughing. “I know that a good 30 percent of them had never seen a play before. But then, there they were at the stage door afterwards in a flood of tears saying, ‘Oh, my God, theater! We never knew! We’d only ever seen movies!’”

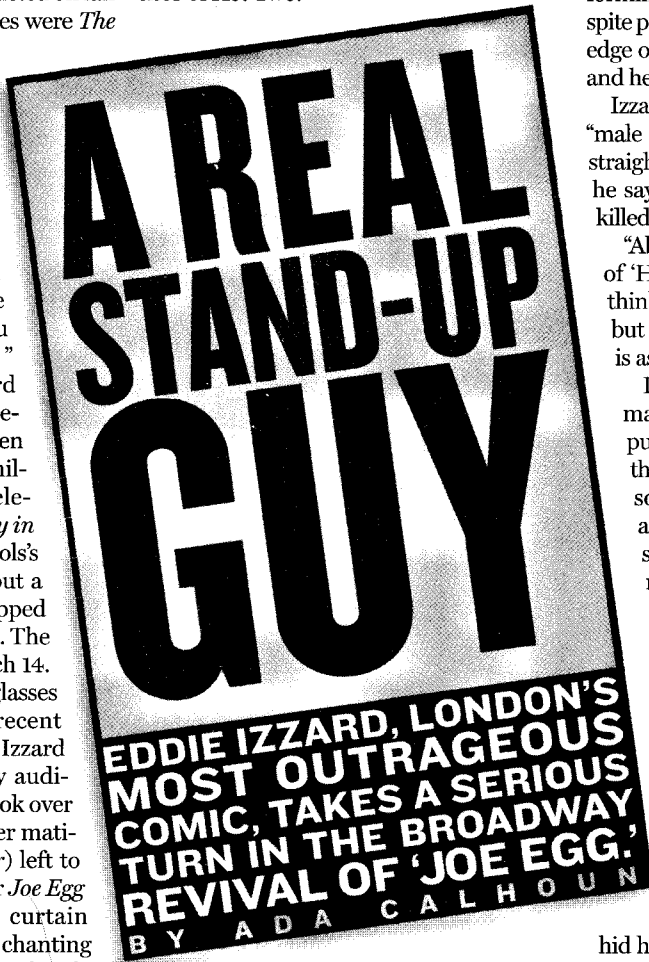
And now Hamilton and Izzard will be performing to the Roundabout Theatre’s largely subscription audience, a concept they can’t quite get their heads around.

“Is that like *conscriptio*?” asks Izzard. “They’ll get a letter and cry, ‘Oh, God, I’m I-A! I’ve got to go to the . . . theater!’”

The play, and both Hamilton and Izzard, received glowing reviews in London. The only substantial criticism was that the second act, when the marriage is being

ripped apart by the strain of taking care of the child, lacked credibility. Izzard and Hamilton as Bri and Sheila appeared to be having, well, too much fun.

“It’s logical that I should be able to do Act One,” says Izzard, turning self-critical, “because it’s all vaudeville.” (Literally—Nichols intended the part to be played by a stand-up comic and was, in his words, “cock-a-hoop”—delighted—when Izzard signed on.) “What we’re working on now is trying to keep the black in the black humor of Act Two.”



“No one believed we would leave each other in the end,” Hamilton says with a sigh. “So now we’re working on the darkness and despair.”

“Working with her *is* darkness and despair,” says Izzard, perking back up.

“You *love* the drama.”

“I *hate* that you can articulate what I’m doing better than I can. It pisses me off. Well, I’m better at accounting than you.”

“My 3-year-old cousin is better at accounting than me. You’re childish.”

“Childlike.”

“Childish.”

“It’s a bit of magic,” *Joe Egg*’s director, Laurence Boswell, says of the chemistry between Izzard and Hamilton. “They turn

each other on and chase each other like cat and dog. They’re constantly in the middle of some never-ending argument. It’s a creative love affair. They’re actually quite exhausting to be around.”

PART OF THE CHEMISTRY COMES FROM THE FACT that they share a motto: *Anything that throws you is good*. Being thrown by Hamilton is a new thrill for Izzard, but he’s been throwing himself for years: initially putting himself on the line as a street performer, performing in French when he’s in France despite possessing only an intermediate knowledge of the language, and wearing makeup and heels in public.

Izzard revealed his sexuality (what he calls “male lesbian” or “action transvestite”—i.e., straight but fond of eyeliner) at 23, when, he says somberly, it might very well have killed his career. Was that really a danger?

“Ab-so-lu-mah!” says Izzard. “I got a lot of ‘Hey, we can’t deal with that.’ People think everyone in Britain wears dresses, but that’s not actually true. Homophobia is as thick there as it is here.”

It appears that every choice Izzard makes onstage and off is intended to push back fear. “Yes! Fear is the thing that slows you down—in acting, business, social interaction, lovemaking,” he agrees. “If you fear, then you won’t give such a wild performance when you’re making love to someone for the first or second or nineteenth time. But if you have no fear, then you will have sex on top of a spike! It’s kind of difficult, but maybe you would!”

Izzard is no stranger to fear. He was born in Yemen, where his English parents worked at British Petroleum, his father as an accountant and his mother as a nurse. Then, when he was 6, his mother died, and he and his brother were sent to a hellish prep school. He

hid his cross-dressing from the other kids “‘cause I thought they might kill me with sticks” and wound up studying accounting in college “because they don’t let you study, like, *fish*.” Somewhere in all that, Izzard says, “I developed comedy as a social tool and then got professionally funny.”

Now the challenge is to become professionally dramatic. “I’ve got a gift for nothing. I only have the gift of getting good by working relentlessly. Like in the London run of *Joe Egg*, I finally nailed the role on the second-to-last performance—”

“Oh, I always think that, too, about final performances,” Hamilton interrupts breezily. “You just *think* you did.”

“No, I really did,” pleads Izzard. “Laurence *saw* me. I finally got that last bit.”

“Hmmm,” Hamilton says with a sly smile. ■