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Rising to the
challenge

In the spotlight

Renaissance
Sheffield

A meeting
of minds

A dramatic return

Eddie Izzard finally collects his degree

A dramatic return

Comedian and actor Eddie Izzard could lay claim to the title of most famous ex-student not to graduate from the University of Sheffield. All that changed on 19 July 2006, when he received an honorary doctorate before an audience of delighted graduands.



Members of the Alternative Productions Society receiving the 'Students on Stage Award', jointly sponsored in 1983 by *Cosmopolitan* magazine and Lloyds Bank. Eddie Izzard is on the left.

Eddie Izzard first came to the University in 1980 to study Accounting and Financial Management, Economics and Pure Mathematics – allegedly because it had the longest title in the UCCA handbook. “I was born in Yemen, then I was in Northern Ireland, then I was in South Wales so I’d really seen a lot of places. And then I’d been in the south for 11 years and I thought I did want to go somewhere north,” he said. “I could add up and I wanted to do a course that I could just do while I concentrated on my shows.

“So I got here and I didn’t do anything the first term, but after that I did a show the second term and a show the third term, and then they threw me out, and I just did loads of shows and slept on people’s floors and worked out that I was going to tell everyone that I was a transvestite and that was good, that was in Sheffield.”

He established the award-winning Alternative Productions Society which put on cabaret-style events, poetry readings, dance and travelling theatre shows: “There was a lot of great energy coming out of the University at that time and I was aware of people like Stephen Daldry and Linda Smith putting on some amazing stuff. They were a bit older than me but I wanted something of that. In a sense I did my own degree.” Reuben Grocock of the Drama Studio

remembers, “It was a bit of a nightmare, the challenges we were set. Eddie and his mate Rob Ballard were always pushing the envelope as far as possible.”

Comic reviews such as *Sherlock Holmes Sings Western* and a five-person re-enactment of *Ben Hur* were just two of the highlights of Eddie’s creative career in Sheffield. He took a show to the Edinburgh Festival in 1981, which he has described as being the start of a learning curve on what makes people laugh. After several stamina-building years as a street performer he became a stand-up comic, inspired by Monty Python, Richard Pryor and early Benny Hill. His first stage appearance as a comic was at the Comedy Store in 1987, and within six years he had won a British Comedy Award for *Live at the Ambassadors*, with another following in 1996 for *Definite Article*. His appearance in *Dress to Kill*, shown on HBO, earned him two Emmy Awards in 2000 for performance and writing.

His real dream was to act, and soon those chances came along with offers of parts in theatrical and film productions. His stage portrayal of Brian in Peter Nichols’ black comedy *A Day in the Life of Joe Egg* won him critical acclaim including a nomination for a Tony Award in 2003. Other stage credits include David Mamet’s *The Cryptogram* and Marlowe’s *Edward II*. A move into film

and television acting has seen him work with some of the top directors and actors. He was in the middle of filming *The Riches*, a TV series for FX Channel with Minnie Driver as his co-star, when he flew into the UK for the graduation ceremony. The film *Ocean’s 13*, in which he plays Roman Nagel, was released in June this year.

Eddie has a long-standing interest in current affairs and is an ardent European, appearing on *Newsnight* and *Question Time* to discuss the virtues of the single currency and European integration. He has also used his talents to raise awareness and funds for his two favourite charities, Amnesty International and the Prince’s Trust.

Having left the world of accountancy long ago, he now acknowledges that some of the course might have rubbed off: “I own copyright on all my DVDs which hardly anyone has, apart from Lucille Ball. But from my very first stand-up video I refused to give the rights to anyone, which was an excellent accountancy decision. So maybe I got something out of it.”

He came to the ceremony with his father, Harold John Izzard. When asked why he accepted the honorary degree, Eddie said, “Well, as much as anything I did it for my father who wanted me to have a degree after 25 years.”

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