

TV Close-Up: Eddie Izzard

by Eirik_Knutzen

"I'm just your average, everyday, straight transvestite - and I've been a straight transvestite all my life," said Eddie Izzard, a bearded man often dressed in women's clothing off-camera. "I knew I was a cross-dresser when I was 4, told an ex-girlfriend at 21, then told everybody when I was 23."

Clad in masculine, nicely tailored slacks and a crisp dress shirt, the 45-year-old British dramatic actor-strange comedian was relaxing between scenes of "The Riches" (10 p.m. EST Monday, FX) series in his dressing room/trailer on location in suburban Los Angeles.

EDDIE IZZARD - In 'The Riches,' Eddie Izzard plays Wayne Malloy, a traveler from Louisiana running scams to feed and clothe his family. CNS Photo courtesy of Frank Micelotta.

"People think, 'Oh, I'm sure you're gay and pretending. ...' I say, 'Why wouldn't I tell anyone?'" he continued, a tad bitter. "Why would I take all this crap and have all these people fighting me in the streets if I was actually gay? Or people firing me for being a transvestite? What's the difference? To lie about it would be really stupid because there are a hell of a lot of straight, gay and bi transvestites out there."

Although Izzard doesn't play a cross-dresser in "The Riches," his life experiences as an outsider prepared him well for the role of Wayne Malloy, a Gypsy traveler from backwoods Louisiana running scams ranging from very crude to ultraconservative in order to feed, clothe and house his angry insecure family. English actress Minnie Driver plays his wife, Dahlia, just out after a two-year stretch in the slammer for getting both hands caught in a till. Shannon Woodard, Noel Fisher and Aidan Mitchell portray their three children, all in training from birth as grifters in order to fleece buffers - law-abiding jerks and Samaritans alike.

Their lives take a weird turn one day when their beat-up motor home careens around a blind curve and causes a luxury car with Doug and Cherien Rich in it to swerve off the road at a high rate of velocity to wind up dead. Wracked by guilt, but sensing a golden opportunity, Wayne persuades his wife and family to assume the Riches' identities and take over their brand-new house in suburbia.

"Wayne Malloy - I feel like there's a lot of stuff out of me that I've put into him - may be closer to me than any other role," mused Izzard. "He's an outsider who came to the (traveler) community when he was 14; he had to prove that he was better at cons and grifts than anybody else. But now he wants to change his life and his family's - and lie and cheat and steal his way to a legitimate life."

Born in Yemen when the port city of Aden was still a British colony ("it's my 'Lawrence of Arabia' beginnings"), Izzard and his older brother were born to a midwife-nurse and an accountant for British Petroleum. The family moved on to Northern Ireland when he was a toddler, but his life became a series of punishing boarding schools when his mother died of cancer five years later.

"All I can say is that the American immigration authorities are very interested in my passport," he said, laughing. "They were focused on my birth (in Yemen), and it didn't ease up until I got off a plane wearing a dress and makeup. Bizarrely, it made things easier for me. They seemed to think, 'Oh, he's a transvestite ... he doesn't look like al-Qaida ... what the hell, let him in.' Now I have a green card."

By his late teens, the action transvestite ("I'm a big boy who loves shooting and blowing things up") moved to London in order to pursue acting, a childhood dream. Not particularly adept at the craft at first, lack of employment forced him into four years as a scantily paid sketch comedian, followed by another four years as a borderline starving street performer in London, Dublin, Ireland, and Edinburgh, Scotland.

"Initially, I couldn't do either - I was crap at everything," he explained. "For some reason, I just didn't get it. I got worse and worse, eventually really failing and losing all my confidence. The lowest point was being about 25 and being shown up by 19-year-olds who were paid a lot more and were traveling around the world."

Ironically, it was his street performing that opened the door for stand-up comedy and straight acting down the line. "On a sidewalk somewhere I discovered that I could word rap endlessly on a wide variety of subjects," he said, chuckling. "But I was never good writing for myself and I still just ad-lib on stage - then craft the ad-libs. When I did it at 'Hysteria,' a London benefit, things began to happen."

Alan Rickman opened the floodgates a few inches in 1993 by casting Izzard in his first dramatic stage role in "The Cryptogram." His many film roles were launched in "The Secret Agent" (1996) and he gained fame with his one-man show, "Dress to Kill," which aired on HBO in 1999 and garnered two Emmy Awards. In the near future, he will be seen in the British comedic miniseries "Kitchen" and the American films "Across the Universe" and "Ocean's Thirteen."

Unless "extraordinarily tired" after cranking out 13 episodes of "The Riches," the secretive bachelor who did a Tony Award-nominated turn in "A Day in the Death of Joe Egg" four years ago, would like to fire up his one-man show once more in Germany and France - "because I love doing gigs in French and German."

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