

ROCKY COMEDY

Comedian and satirist Steve Punt on making it in stand-up, narrating *The Rocky Horror Show* and hiding away in Wimbledon

Words MADELEINE HOWELL



The Now Show presenter is bringing his comic wit to a musical for the first time



It's like being in a school play,' Steve Punt mutters, hiding in his dressing room as he avoids calls from Wimbledon friends, mostly parents from his son's school, out in force to see him narrate the *Rocky Horror Show* at the New Wimbledon Theatre.

Punt has counted himself as a Wimbledonian for a long time now, and remembers fondly the days when he shared a flat in South Park Road with fellow comedian Hugh Dennis, the other half of stand-up duo Punt and Dennis, as a 'struggling scriptwriter'. Back then, he was fresh from his first taste of comic success at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with the Cambridge University Footlights (of which other alumni include, of course, Rowan Atkinson, but also Sue Perkins of the *Great British Bake Off* and Simon Bird of *The Inbetweeners*). These days, he's famous for his satirical co-hosting on BBC Radio 4's *The Now Show*, and writes for *Mock the Week*. If you keep your eyes



Punt has enjoyed playing along with the heckling

peeled, you'll often spot him in one of Wimbledon's burgeoning coffee shops, scribbling away in an innocuous woollen hat.

Now, though, he has made his first foray into musical theatre as none other than the legendary deadpan narrator in the cross-dressing, innuendo-packed romp that is *The Rocky Horror Show* alongside Diana Vickers as Janet Weiss. *Rocky* has a cult following – was it something he had always wanted to do? 'Without knowing it, yes,' he ponders the question. 'I first saw the film when I was

15. The narrator in *Rocky* is a very rare part in a musical when you can put someone like me into the mix, from a comedy background – I haven't been to stage school, or trained in dance. On top of that, *Rocky* has a unique relationship with its audience. It's a combination of rare performance opportunities. I thought to myself, "this is not the kind of thing that comes along very often".

Rocky has a unique relationship with its audience – it's a rare opportunity

'In rehearsal, the directors were very strict about paraphrasing. They treat it like Shakespeare, on the grounds that people in the audience will know it better than you do. My job is to do what's expected, but bring a bit of added value. Coming from a stand-up background rather than an acting background, I can play along with the heckling. Actors aren't so used to talking to the audience. The audience in Wimbledon has been great, although my daughter got a sudden Facebook message from a friend saying "I just saw your Dad!" Punt crumples his face in mock embarrassment. 'Out front, I feel very self-conscious. It helps that theatres all feel the same backstage so I can switch off a bit.' The pre-performance backstage Punt is by turns reflective and jittery, in contrast to the



Punt shared a flat with Hugh Dennis in Wimbledon after he left Cambridge



The cast of The Rocky Horror Show

bawdy stage persona that has the audience in stitches later that evening.

What advice would he give to budding comedians? ‘At school, a friend and I did a bunch of sketches mostly making fun of teachers. It was almost certainly terrible, but it gave me a bit of confidence, enough to try out for the Footlights. Comedy has become much more of an industry since. It’s very open-access. I can’t think of another art form where it is easier to start: you can literally just look for the pubs that do open spots, phone one up and then go and do five minutes. A lot of it is based around solo stand-up, so it’s very self-contained. You can rehearse a lot in your head, you can rehearse on the bus, or anywhere you want. It’s just a question of confidence. The stand-up and open-spot scene in London is incredibly healthy.

‘I learnt my way around London from driving around in Hugh’s golf with an A to Z. I spent so many nights of my life standing backstage feeling nervous or out front watching people, standing at the bar commiserating afterwards. If your set goes well, you feel a massive sense of bon homie towards the whole world. There’s a bit of a perception that comedians are bitter or envious. I don’t think that’s true, although I do sometimes still get a feeling of “I wish I’d written that joke!”’

Steve suddenly cocks his head anxiously. ‘When this music changes



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from thumpy-thumpy to piano, that’s when I have to go and warm up,’ he explains. He’s lost his train of thought, but I ask him what he loves about Wimbledon. ‘I love the Common in winter when the ducks are sliding around on the ice, and it’s equally lovely in summer. It’s a good place to be if you’ve got a bike. I’m

unashamedly a fair weather cyclist though. I’m not a masochist.’ With that, he heads off to heckle along with the braying matinée audience.

Steve Punt is narrating in The Rocky Horror Show from 2-7 May; 0844 871 7651; rockyhorror.co.uk