

JAN 2024
BN1 MAGAZINE

BN1



Dom Joly

PLUS:

MILES JUPP / JOSH PUGH / HUXLXY
& THE WORDS THAT CHANGE LIVES

Dom Joly

The Conspiracy Tourist heads out on the road

By Stuart Rolt

"I just love having strange conversations with people,"

Dom Joly tells me. "As long as they're not violently racist or really offensive, I really love listening to other people's weird beliefs." After shooting to fame with one of the most gleeful and surreal hidden cameras to grace television, Joly has turned his skills to travel-writing in recent years.

Travelling the world in search of unusual adventures, he's found himself skiing in Iran, hunting Sasquatch in northern California and hiking through the hills of Lebanon with Hezbollah members. It's probably as close as you can get to the Boys Own adventures of old, in a world of easy communication and travel where there are no more lands left to discover. In his latest book, *The Conspiracy Tourist: Travels Through a Strange World*, he's set out to discover why so many think Finland isn't a real place or that the Earth is flat.

"It's like a very odd phone-in show on the radio, where you're slightly appalled," he says. "It is interesting to hear what other people think. I did genuinely want to try and work out why other people believed what they did and what made them tick. I do find it fascinating." The book starts with an impromptu battle with an anonymous anti-vaxxer, who'd been plastering the neighbourhood with stickers which claimed the pandemic was a hoax and the vaccine is dangerous. Joly made up some of his own, which read: "LEAKED CIA DOCUMENTS REVEAL THAT PANDEMIC DENIERS HAVE MICRO PENISES" and the pair spent the next few months anonymously covering up each other's tiny self-adhesive propaganda.

"What particularly riled me was that I had a friend in hospital on a ventilator. I was getting all this crap from people saying Covid didn't exist, and

that the vaccine was for Bill Gates to implant a microchip on your brain." Being in Lockdown, he had plenty of time to think about the trend. He was angry about the spread of misinformation, but also started wondering if these beliefs were in good faith or were people doing it for the attention. "Conspiracies in the old days were quite harmless. You had things like Bigfoot and 'did we land on the Moon?' They were all quite fun. After Trump came in, things really started to change. The moment his spokesperson, Kellyanne Conway, used the term 'alternative facts' then truth became an odd thing. I just wanted to look people in the eyes and ask them if they believed these things. And they did!"

Which is how he came to be travelling the globe (or disc...) in search of the more outlandish theories. From getting the facts from QAnon devotees and hunting UFOs in the desert to visiting what he was told was Finland and visiting the assumed edge of the world,

While it's a work packed with humour and genuinely strange moments, it quickly becomes apparent that Joly is not there to exploit the people he talks to for cheap laughs. You can tell he gets real joy from discovering more about what sits at the fringes of Western society. "I realised I should have taken Ubers all around the world. Because you learn a lot about a country from their drivers. You get this random mix of people. Often, they're immigrants. And immigrants have a really interesting take on a country, because they're looking at it from a slightly detached point of view."

Part of this affection for the periphery might stem from his less than conventional childhood. Growing up in a house in hills above Beirut, he was a witness to the horror and absurdity of the Lebanese Civil War. "I think I've always been an outsider really. In Lebanon, we were British, and I felt very at home there, but at school I was always the weird kid who lived in a warzone. All the stuff I read was French and Belgian; things like Asterix, Lucky Luke and Tintin, so I've always slightly hovered above things. I think that's where my

comedy came from. I've always looked at aspects of English life and thought: 'that's very strange.'" He says that growing up in somewhere like Lebanon, which is both very strange and utterly beautiful, does provoke an interest in politics and history.

"I think conspiracies are just another way of looking at things. I like the idea that there is stuff which science can't explain. But I'm also quite wary of UFO stories and that they only seem to turn up and probe hillbillies. If they're really interested in communicating with us, why don't they just land outside the UN?"

Joly tells me it's often complicated to explain to people what he does. Especially when needing to describe his occupation on the numerous landing cards he must fill out on his travels. He certainly doesn't describe himself as a journalist. "What am I? A man famous for shouting into a big mobile phone, who now decided he's a travel writer. You just say the word journalist because it's easier, I suppose. I say writer more, but it depends what language I'm talking. Because in some countries, being a journalist has a very different connotation." He'd ideally identify as 'an observer', which might still cause a few problems at borders. Although, he does let on that he's heard Boy George writes 'Fairy'. Which seems rather fabulous. "I used to have 'comedian', but that means something very different. In French it means actor, so people would get confused with that. I now have 'clown', which I love..."

To follow-on from the book, Joly is soon hitting the road with *The Conspiracy Tour*. Calling at Brighton's Komedia on Wed 28 Feb and Eastbourne's Devonshire Park Theatre on Sun 10 March, this unique theatre experience will offer a fascinating, and slightly anarchic exploration of the worlds he's uncovered. "I've never really done live stuff, apart from the last tour. I'd always been a TV comic, so it wasn't what I did. I literally forced myself to become a live performer and did what I'd describe as 'extreme PowerPoint' trying to persuade people that their next holiday should be in Lebanon." He says this tour is decidedly



Joly playing the role of Dr Julian Northcote

more comedic. The first half is a summary of the book and how the theories propagate. For the second half, he's invited Britain's leading conspiracy theorist, Dr Julian Northcote, to defend the alternate view. Strangely, this esteemed expert has almost no internet presence. "He's written various books like *Cows: Britain's Secret Killer* and *The Complete History of The Public Bench*. He's going to come on and give some balance."

He admits that his previous approach to live performance had been a little unconventional. "All my successful TV was all ad-libbed. I love the editing process. I'd spend hours and years putting music on and making it flow. But when it came to live stuff, I assumed that ad-libbing was my magic dust. I'd just go on and go for it. Sometimes it's brilliant, but other times it would just fall flat, and I'd get very nervous. I realised you actually have to prepare and build a show."

Much of Joly's reputation as a prankster stems from the absolutely massive *Trigger Happy TV*. This gleefully surreal and increasingly inventive Channel 4 show reinvented hidden camera stunts for a new millennium. Accompanied by an achingly cool soundtrack, it featured gangs of human-sized cuddly animals acting like hooligans, nihilistic signs, inept Russian spies and getting a range of unsuspecting tradespeople to work on a child's playhouse. While many similar shows used the public as the butt of their jokes, it invariably provoked brilliant reactions from onlookers, who would react with politeness or kindness.

In some ways, Joly's transferal from TV to live performance (via travel writing) goes against the traditional career path for a comedian. "*Trigger Happy* could only exist on television, and it was a real skill. It used to piss me off that commissioning editors would go to Edinburgh, grab a stand-up and put them on telly. They're very different skills. I was very aware, when I do live stuff, that I'm stepping on people's toes. I haven't paid my dues in that area. I think it's because I'm not a stand-up. I'm sitting there telling jokes." He admits when he first did stand-up, he got hammered by reviewers. "Probably rightly so. I didn't know what I was doing. But I feel I've reached a moment where I can go onstage and I feel confident."

He's got an affection for the Komedia, having already visited the venue several times. "I was in Brighton for a month doing *The Rocky Horror*

Show, and I was going there a lot." He's done a lot of work in and around the city, as a colleague lives in Hove. "When I did a new version of *Trigger*, I filmed quite a lot there. Brighton's a fantastic place to film because you've got everything. There's the seaside, the city and then a two minute drive and you're up on Devil's Dyke."

While he's already brought his travel writing to the small screen with shows like *Dom Joly's Happy Hour*, where he explored the world's various drinking habits, and walking the Sultans Trail between Belgrade to Istanbul for the BBC's *Pilgrimage*, he does seem like a natural choice to replace Michael Palin when the Monty Python star eventually hangs up his travelling trousers. "My dream in life is doing that. I once saw Michael on the street when I was driving. I've met him, and he's one of the loveliest people on Earth. But there was a temptation to just sneeze and bump him off. Him and Bill Bryson, there's just a couple of people I need to get out of the way." Joly suggests he's not seen in the same light. Part of the reason might be because he's jumped from being a comedian to doing travelogues. Palin did something similar yet did manage to become a national treasure in-between. "I hope that people are starting to see it's something I'm serious about. I've tried to pay my dues with these books. *That Travel Man* on Channel 4... They've asked every comedian I've ever heard of. But I've never been asked to go on it.; I don't know what it is. Probably people loathe me. But I'm just not seen as a travel person. I am determined to break through though."

All of his books seem like obvious ideas for a TV show. His *The Dark Tourist: Sightseeing in The World's Most Unlikely Holiday Destinations*, being a prime example. It sees Joly examine the bleakness of the Chernobyl exclusion zone, trying not to laugh while exploring North Korea and embarking on a road trip between USA's most notorious assassination sites. "I really didn't want to do them as TV shows, because if you make a travelogue you can't write a book at the same time." Making a show means you're always hanging out with the crew. Which would probably be delightful, but to do what he does best Joly needs to head off on his own and see what happens.

"When I wrote *The Dark Tourist*, we pitched it to Netflix, who said they loved it. We didn't hear

anything back. Then a year later, a show called *Dark Tourist* came out. They totally nicked it. I was so fucking angry about that, I just forgot about it." A production company in the US has just reserved the TV rights to *The Conspiracy Tourist*. "It is something which could make an interesting series. I think that's probably what I'm going to do next."

Ostensibly, *The Conspiracy Tourist* has also seen a big change in Joly's approach. Most of his previous books have been about the desire to touch history in a way. Works like *The Hezbollah Hiking Club: A Short Walk Across the Lebanon* have all come from a personal space. Now, he's found himself writing a trend which impacts us all. "I didn't think about writing a book which was more relevant to people. It does seem to have really triggered something. We are aware that this conspiracy thing is getting bigger and bigger with the rise of things like AI, deep fakes, online scams and the algorithms driving it all.

"Our Instagram pages are delivering alternative universes. You realise people interested in that stuff are just being fed it. For them, what you or I think is completely weird. Because they're getting a completely different reality. It's very frightening." He's at pains to point out *The Conspiracy Tourist* isn't a scientific book. He just wanted to tour around and find out a bit more firsthand. "They make us think that something terrible or random has happened because there's a reason and person behind it. More and more people are feeling powerless, perhaps it gives them a sense of power in this secret knowledge."

"I totally understand why people get into conspiracies. I'm not denigrating them or getting angry, but when you start to spread fear to the vulnerable it becomes a real issue. One of the reasons people want to believe in them is that life is chaotic. As humans, we try and put order on things. Conspiracy theories help us do that."

Dom Joly's *The Conspiracy Tour* comes to Brighton's Komedia on Wed 28 Feb and Eastbourne's Devonshire Park Theatre on Sun 10 March. His book, *The Conspiracy Tourist: Travels Through a Strange World*, is available now via Robinson.

www.domjoly.tv
www.komedia.co.uk/brighton
www.eastbournetheatres.co.uk