

The Office

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Ricky Gervais plays David Brent



Cower under your desk and hide the stapler, because David Brent, played by Ricky Gervais, is back to his boastful best in *The Office*, a painfully accurate and hilarious portrayal of office life that will make you cringe and put you off your packed lunch. It's lucky, then, that Ricky Gervais bears almost no resemblance to his on-screen persona – an arrogant, swaggering buffoon who acts as if he's the head of the Mafia when, in actual fact, he's the middle manager of a paper merchant in Slough.

"I've got his figure," Ricky laughs, when prompted about his similarities to David, "and I'm incredibly annoying, but I do it on purpose to [annoy] my friends." The charismatic 40-year-old certainly seems more self-aware than David Brent, whose irritating management style is funny to no one but himself and is often at the expense of the poor sods who work for him. Though he may seem like a monstrous creation, Ricky thinks that everyone has something in common with antihero David Brent, which is probably what makes him so watchable.

"I think everyone, if you scratch them enough, will want to make sure they're liked. They want to think that they have a purpose in life. They don't want to think that they're in a dead-end job and, if they are, they want to at least think that they're getting something out of it.

"So, we've all got that problem, but most of us worry about whether we have a blind spot, and Brent doesn't. Brent, by definition, thinks nothing of it. He doesn't think anyone dislikes him; why would he? Everything he does is brilliant, because he can't imagine doing anything wrong, because he loves himself so much."

The idea for David Brent actually evolved from Seedy Boss, a character developed by Ricky while working at radio station Xfm with Stephen Merchant, with whom he co-wrote and co-directed *The Office*. He says of those early days: "I had an idea for this boss who got away with murder and wanted to be loved, a bit pretentious. And also, there were a lot of docusoaps happening in the mid-to-late-Nineties, and I loved the fact that ordinary people – well everyone's ordinary – but people without any training or anything to do with the entertainment world, by any stretch of the imagination, could use this platform on a national scale to become stars overnight."

So David was born out of Ricky's fertile imagination because he "liked the idea that an ordinary person, someone like David Brent, who thinks he's an entertainer anyway and thinks he's loved and deserves more or thinks he deserves more – when they're given a chance on

a platform – think: ‘This is my chance. I can show the world how funny, how intelligent, how important I am.’ Of course, he opens his mouth and he’s an idiot”.

But it wasn’t just the Jane McDonalds and the Jeremy Spakes of the world who fascinated Ricky, but also people who have that irritating habit of bragging about themselves. “It’s these people who have to tell other people that they’re popular. It’s like they can’t be bothered to go through the normal stuff of getting to know someone. They want to hand out a business card that says: ‘Mr X, funny, you’ll like me, just get on with it, just admire me now and let’s save a lot of time.’ It’s almost like they need to take this shortcut in life, and that fascinated me as well.”

Although the character of David Brent may seem like a bit of an exaggeration, Ricky thinks he acts like many people would but to the umpteenth degree. By way of explanation, he says: “You can have the most important job in the world but if someone, who’s been there six months less than you, gets a bigger chair, you’ll say: ‘Why does he have a bigger chair than me?’ And I think that’s just human nature.”

And Ricky Gervais is certainly an acute observer of human nature, as evident by the characters in *The Office*, people who are immediately recognisable, especially because they’re flawed like normal people are. And like normal people, some of them are failures and lack ambition, which is the crux of what *The Office* is really about. “You look at the person next to you to judge your ambition, your success, and you look at your next door neighbour, the friends you grew up with,” Ricky says thoughtfully. “You don’t judge yourself on President Bush or Robert De Niro. We look at our corner of the world, we look at ourselves in our town in our office on our street, and that’s what’s sad as well. *The Office* is about lack of ambition. If you’re not happy, don’t suddenly wake up when you’re 65 and think: ‘Oh, I should have left. I

wanted to be an artist or I always wanted to be a dressmaker.’”

That such a funny man should spawn such serious thoughts maybe shouldn’t be that surprising, considering he studied philosophy from the University of London, after which he worked as an entertainments manager for their student union. From such a modest beginning, Ricky went on to get his big break on *The 11 O’ Clock Show* as a bigoted roving reporter and later fronted his own chat show. But nothing probably prepared him for the enormous success of *The Office*, whose cult status spread by word of mouth.

“I was really happy with it,” he says proudly. “I thought it would be liked by a few people and some people’s favourite programme in a cult sort of way ... but I didn’t think it would, one, be as popular, two, be as across the board demographically. The group thing surprised me, from teenagers to pensioners. I thought it would be a twentysomething to thirtysomething hit.

“Again, I didn’t expect the broad spectrum of critical acclaim, from the tabloids to the broadsheets, so that was a real success. That was really, really flattering. And I’d told myself: ‘One, the ratings don’t matter and, two, what do the press know?’ But then, obviously, I’m glad that the ratings were enough to get a second series, which was the only reason I ever cared about that. And, of course, the press proved to be discerning, intelligent people, which I always suspected!” Ricky says, bursting into sarcastic laughter.

Ricky attributes the success of the series to “putting everything in, warts and all”. David Brent may not know his employees but Ricky Gervais knows his audience. “There were people who would do a joke [in *The Office*] and sometimes we’d laugh and sometimes we didn’t. And I think people recognised that as slightly more realistic than the average sitcom, and I

think they liked that. People think they get an insight into it. There was no big announcement, no huge gag, so people respect that – that you're not insulting their intelligence."

Ricky Gervais, himself, comes across as intelligent and irrepressibly charming as a jovial joker. He knows that part of the show's appeal and continued success is that it has a narrative, for which people continue to tune in. He explains: "They may have tuned in for comedy, but they stay and watch it for Tim and Dawn. It's like when you go and see comedy. If someone tells you a hundred jokes, after 20 minutes, you'll be looking at your watch. It's wearing; hundreds of one-liners. You laugh but they don't resonate. Whereas, if you go and see a performer like Johnny Vegas, he's got a whole back story when he walks on stage; he creates his own world. The more you watch him, the more you get to know him, the more the payoff."

In Ricky's own words, David has only been on screen for three hours, so there's a lot more to expect but no guitar singing, which may come as a disappointment to some. In the new series, there's a big merger and David gets new staff, which is a big challenge for him. He also gets a new boss, whom Ricky calls his "nemesis" – a man who's better looking, better at his job and more successful. Also, "the will-they-won't-they" romance between Tim and Dawn continues. But Ricky says without hesitation: "I think Brent is still the one to watch for the fun and insight into other people who need to be loved. I think he needs a cuddle," at which point Ricky bursts into uncontrolled laughter.

Mackenzie Crook plays Gareth



It's no wonder Mackenzie Crook's star is rising. In BBC Two's *The Office* he plays Gareth, the serious, curtain-fringed, survival "expert" who has a knack of putting his foot in it. His character has fast become one of Britain's most popular television characters – and, what slightly concerns Mackenzie, is that he recognises a lot of Gareth in himself. "There are probably more resemblances between me and Gareth than I'd like to admit," Mackenzie explains. "He's very pedantic. I don't think I'm pedantic in everyday life, but he loves trivia and facts, and that's what I'm into as well. And survival stuff; I'm quite into learning about that. I just have a tendency to get very nerdy about any hobbies I pick up. I'm into fish-keeping at the moment; I will bore people stupid with stuff about fish-keeping. Whereas Gareth obsesses about wars, survival and territorial army, I can be boring and nerdy, too."

Of course, the other more obvious similarity between Mackenzie and Gareth is *that* haircut. Mackenzie has very bravely twice chopped his "usually longer" locks into something that resembles a disturbing second-division-footballer's coif, circa 1988. "Naturally I would wear my hair longer; I have done [so] for years until *The Office*. In fact, when I left school, I swore I would never get a job where I had to wear a suit or get my hair cut,"

Mackenzie laments. "And then, of course, this came along, and I had to do both. But I don't mind. I just managed to get it grown out from the first series, when the second series came along. I've been living with this haircut for a couple of years. It takes months and months to grow." He pauses, then frowns before confessing: "I had to get married with this haircut."

Sacrifices with scissors aside, Mackenzie is thrilled to be involved with such a successful show and to be working with a talented team. He appreciated early on just how brilliantly the characters had been written by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. "Gareth is never really the kind of character that will move on; he's never going to be boss but he tries his best and sticks to the rules," he says. "One of my favourite Gareth moments has to be when he walks into the office to discover the others talking about their ultimate fantasies. He starts talking about two lesbians, and that has to be my favourite line. The other one was when we went to Chasers night-club, and I drove away in a sidecar with a swinging couple." He laughs before continuing: "I remember Ricky phoning me up after he'd just written that, and him telling me the scene down the phone because he was so excited."

Unsurprisingly then, he was not at all overwhelmed with the acclaim the first series received. "I wasn't that surprised about how well it did," Mackenzie proclaims. "It sounds arrogant, but excuse me, I didn't write it! I did know – and sort of predicted – it would be a slow-burner as well." He now sees the influence the series has had on many other television and film projects. "*The Office* has started a trend for this realistic style of filming, this documentary style," he says. "I went for an audition for a Working Title film which is filmed in a very similar way. I think a lot of people are taking their cue from *The Office*."

Before joining this winning team, Mackenzie who always wanted to act, was fully involved with his stand-up characters, Charlie Cheese and Bagshaw. Cheese, “an end-of-the-pier-type entertainer” and Bagshaw were both characters he invented and performed for ITV’s *Comedy Café*. He saw stand-up as a way of breaking into acting because he “didn’t really want to go to drama school”. “By the time I’d decided I wanted to be an actor,” Mackenzie explains, “I couldn’t really face the idea of going to drama school for four years, so I tried to get through the back door via comedy.” It was a successful move, but mainly because he chose to do character-based stand-up. He says: “It’s good to perform as a character; I do tend to play assholes, lowlifes or losers. I would have nothing to say as myself; I like to be disguised as much as possible.”

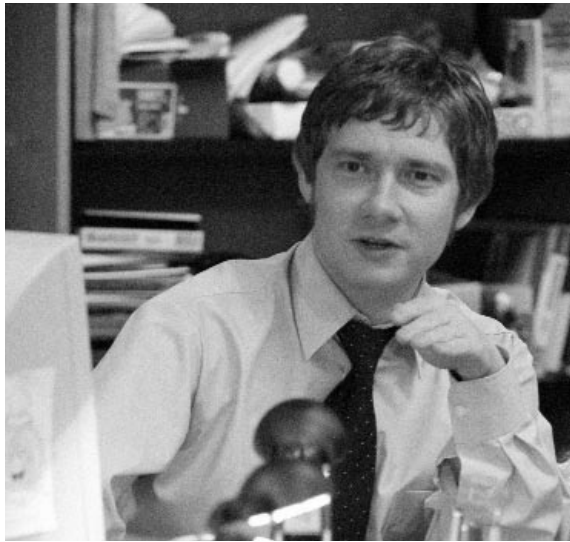
He supported his early career with a few temporary jobs of the unmemorable variety. “I’ve not worked in many offices, but I’ve worked in rubbish jobs which I didn’t like,” he laughs, “and there’s always a Gareth-type figure there, so I’ve drawn on those experiences and fed them into Gareth’s personality.” In particular, his brief encounter with a publishing company gave Mackenzie’s first-hand experience of an office-type environment. “It was very much like Wernham Hogg,” he explains. “There were lots of egos and clashes of personality.” He continues: “There was a young, high-flying salesman who thought he was really cool, and the boss who had a Porsche. I thought to myself then: ‘This is not where I want to be for the rest of my life.’”

And so determination drove him to star in two series of *TV To Go*, a sketch-show series for BBC One, the television series *Bruiser* (alongside *Office* colleague Martin Freeman) and radio shows *Pick Of The Fringe* and *The Now Show*. Mackenzie has also broken into feature films. He appeared in British movies *Still Crazy* and *Brick Lane*, and completed his first Hollywood picture called *The Gathering*, starring Christina Ricci and Ioan Gryffid, released in the UK this October. Last month, he joined Johnny Depp

and Kate Winslet on the set of *Neverland*, to film the biopic of Peter Pan author, JM Barrie.

But for now, it’s the second series of *The Office* that has Mackenzie’s undivided attention. The new series sees Gareth’s office amalgamated with the Swindon branch, bringing new challenges and new faces. Unlucky-in-love Gareth is left competing with “fresh blood” for a girlfriend whilst “continuing to annoy Tim to a great extent”. And Mackenzie genuinely seems fond of the series when he says: “We all had this big feeling this time round knowing we were working on something really special.” He concludes by saying: “Although we had that feeling the first time round, nobody quite knew how it would be received, but this time round everyone was aware – especially the new actors joining the show – that it was groundbreaking stuff to be involved in. It’s been really fun.”

Martin Freeman plays Tim



Tim was last seen going through a bit of a crisis in *The Office*. Sitting next to colleague Gareth was ruining his life, he humiliated himself by asking receptionist Dawn – engaged to her bullying boyfriend – out on a date during a training session and his job as a sales rep for a paper merchant was not worth the paper his payslip was printed on. And, despite dramatically walking out of his job, Tim miserably crawled back to swollen-headed boss David Brent.

“Tim is the most empathetic character,” says 30-year-old Martin Freeman, who plays the overburdened salesman, “and what does he do at the end of the last series? He pussies out. He doesn’t do what the whole audience is willing him to do. He plays it safe and that’s what people do, and I really admire the show for that. He didn’t go off and become an award-winning psychologist or anything. He stayed in his job for an extra 500 quid a year.

“And he didn’t have a fight with Lee, Dawn’s boyfriend. He didn’t go round there and beat him up. There was nothing heroic about it; it

was as downbeat and as dreary and as disappointing as life is; but, at the same time, of course, I think it’s hysterically funny.”

Martin, who originally read for the part of Gareth, played by Mackenzie Crook, is fortunate, then, that he actually loves his own job and doesn’t suffer Tim’s lot in life, but this doesn’t mean that Martin has nothing in common with the character he portrays. In fact, Martin is adamant that Tim is the “everyman” character, meaning the one that most people would be able to relate to. He says: “I vaguely based him on my real brother, Tim, one of my older brothers, who’s kind of sardonic and witty and doesn’t say a lot but what he does say is quite on the money. He’s kind of insightful and can kind of quietly take the piss out of someone without them even realising it. So, yeah, there are a lot of similarities between me and Tim.”

One thing that he certainly doesn’t share in common with Tim is the disgust he has for some of his colleagues, especially Gareth, a serious jobsworth, whom he taunts and teases mercilessly. “There really isn’t a lot of ego about on the set or, actually, the derelict office that we use,” Martin says chuckling. “We’re not the Waltons, but we kind of ring each other up occasionally and we’ll all go out.”

When asked to narrow down exactly what it is he likes best about playing Tim, Martin says that it’s just being a part of an exceptional programme. “I think in *The Office* you really can just be and you better not do any acting at all, because it would just show up and it would be absolutely fake. I really enjoy that, because it’s nice to have that little oasis of calm.

“If you’re lucky enough to have a load of jobs that might be called a career, it’s nice to have that kind of place to go to and just try and be as real as possible and as much like yourself as

you can be, in a way. I mean that applies to me, but that doesn't apply to say, Mackenzie, because Mackenzie is not very much like Gareth, because Mackenzie is lovely and Gareth is a nob."

Martin may not be singing Gareth's praises, but he has more favourable things to say about Ricky Gervais, who plays David Brent, the boorish boss everyone loves to hate, but who seems to have a bit of a soft spot for Tim. "He's quite hyper, I would say. He's not a wallflower and he doesn't shut up, but it's usually quite entertaining."

It doesn't take a lot of reading between the lines to guess that there is a lot of clowning around on set, mostly by Ricky, but Martin, who is trained in theatre, is impressed by his ability "to keep take after take as fresh as a daisy", which requires some professionalism. "He's just making it up as he goes along," Martin continues, "but most of his acting instincts are spot on, really bang on, which is very impressive, and he's very good fun to be around. But it's like having a baby on set, certainly, except this baby is actually in charge. It can get a bit tiring, but you feed him and it's all right, like a baby, and then you wind him afterwards."

Switching gears for a moment, Martin, who is also filming an upcoming BBC One drama with Warren Clarke called *The Debt*, says seriously that Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, who co-wrote and co-directed the series, were very careful to "sacrifice gags or funnies for the sake of narrative", ensuring that audiences did not just see a series of jokes, but that they would come away moved and touched. In fact, it seems that there will be some heartbreaking scenes in the second series, which Martin hopes will not come across as overly sentimental or trite, though it seems impossible to believe it could with Ricky Gervais editing the script. On a lighter note, Martin says that there's a scene about Tim's appraisal with David Brent that had

to be re-shot approximately 75 times because he and Ricky kept collapsing into heaps of laughter.

But, for all the apparent hilarity, Tim still suffers from a crisis of sorts, but it's this that Martin thinks makes the show so believable in the first place. "I think what really resonates about the show is not that we've really nailed what it's like to be in an office. I think it's nailed what it's like for people having to work with each other, and the crushes that happen and the frustrations that happen and the fact that your boss is a dick and you can't really say anything, and the crushing ambition that happens in a lot of jobs." In Martin's words, "it's not Dostoevsky, but it's folly and it's true".

Lucy Davis plays Dawn



“If I had to work in an office, I’d rather enjoy having a boss like David Brent,” Lucy Davis says quite seriously. “I’d delight in his madness and his ‘annoying-ness’!” This is probably the first time anybody has actually confessed to liking the smug middle manager from BBC Two’s *The Office* – a character created by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. But seeing the good side to the crass character of David Brent is not difficult for Lucy, whose outlook is always refreshingly positive.

When 29-year-old Lucy took on the role of Dawn, Wernham Hogg’s bright-but-trapped receptionist, she was attracted to the subtle irony of Tim (Martin Freeman), the cringe-making and often ad-libbed humour of David Brent (Ricky Gervais) and the seriousness of his right-hand man, Gareth (Mackenzie Crook). Recalling the early days of *The Office*, Lucy says: “When the scripts were arriving for the first series, I used to make sure I was undisturbed and hide away to read them. It was like knowing I was going to read a very good book.” She continues: “Having done the first series, [it was] easy to imagine the characters delivering those lines, and that makes a big difference. I was so looking forward to reading the second series because I was intrigued with what was in store for us all. Filming the first scene for the second series was amazing – we were all so happy, thinking: ‘Ah, here we go again.’”

It’s obvious that Lucy enjoys her job, unlike her fictional counterpart. Recalling working with Ricky on the first series, she says: “I just remember laughing so much – he was very, very funny.” But it’s Lucy’s main co-star, Martin Freeman, who she says really brings out the best in her. “I find working with all the cast so easy, and it’s great working with Martin,” Lucy says honestly. “He makes acting with him an absolute pleasure and if I’m ever accredited for my acting in *The Office*, it will largely be down to Martin Freeman.”

With such a close cast, it’s no wonder that there’s a definite “buzz” about returning to film the second series. Lucy explains: “Everyone was so excited about coming back to work on the show. It affected all of us, especially as the first series was such a huge success.” Indeed, she was happy to find out that the fate of Dawn and Tim takes an interesting twist in the new episodes. Although viewers will have to wait until the autumn before all is revealed, Lucy reveals one snippet to whet the appetite of *Office* fans. “In the last series, my scenes were largely with Tim,” she says, “but this time round Dawn has more scenes alone, although her relationship with Tim enters a new dimension.”

Despite being a rather likeable character, Lucy admits that she has little in common with Dawn, especially where it concerns passion, ambition and goals. “Although Dawn is quite intelligent and she clicks on to things,” Lucy says, by way of explanation, “I find it frustrating to see someone young, who could have dreams and ambitions, and yet somehow doesn’t ever want to move up or on. That’s something I could never do.” She continues: “I would have to have a go at progressing – even if I was in a shit job, I would have to try. At least then I wouldn’t get to 50 years old and feel like things had never really changed or that I hadn’t tried my best. Dawn needs to do that. Except ... then I wouldn’t be in the next series!”

Lucy is fortunate that her career to date has been dynamic and diverse – a far cry from the office-based desk job Dawn trudges to five days a week. Inspired at a very young age to study drama by a supportive family (her father is comedian Jasper Carrott), Lucy appeared in children’s dramas *Woof* and *The Belfry Witches* before landing a role in the BBC’s acclaimed period drama *Pride And Prejudice*. Lucy has also appeared as a regular on one of BBC Radio 4’s longest-running series, *The Archers*, playing Hayley Jordan.

Despite her impressive CV, Lucy is modest about her success and careful to point out that the rug can often be pulled out from under an actor’s feet. “I remember doing *Pride And Prejudice*, and everyone kept saying to me: ‘Ah, that’s it Lucy, you’ve made it now.’ But that isn’t true – you are so not ‘made’ – ever!” She continues: “*The Office* is certainly the biggest thing I’ve done in terms of accolade, but still that doesn’t mean that I’ve made it. You still have to work really hard at it.” Nevertheless, Lucy remains optimistic. “I’m the kind of person that, if something goes badly wrong, I can handle it because it’s part of my job.” Having already filmed parts in two upcoming feature films: *Nicholas Nickleby* for Universal, starring Jim Broadbent and Juliet Stevenson, and *Come Together* for Working Title, it’s hardly surprising that the talented and charming Lucy Davis is so cheerful.

Stephen Merchant Co-writer/director

Stephen was a finalist in the *Daily Telegraph* Open-Mic Awards in 1998 and, until recently, regularly played at comedy clubs throughout the UK, including a show at the Edinburgh Fringe 2001.

However, the stand-up comedy has now been put on hold after Stephen co-wrote and directed the first series of *The Office*, screened on BBC Two in 2001. The reaction from the press and public was sensational, and the series plucked a number of prestigious awards, including two Baftas. Stephen is also due to direct *The Last Chancers*, a Comedy Lab script for Channel 4.

In between writing and directing, Stephen presents his own show on BBC World Service and a regular show on Xfm with Ricky Gervais. He has recently written and commentated on *Posh Rock*, a youth series for E4.

Stephen has recently appeared in *Cancun*, a BBC pilot written by Sally Phillips in which he played the “tallest man in Cancun”. He will also appear in series two of *The Office* as the “Oggmonster”.

Ash Atalla – Producer

In recent years, Ash Atalla has produced, written and presented. Last year he produced the first series of *The Office* for BBC Two, which was a runaway success. The show won a Bafta for Best Situation Comedy 2001, a British Comedy award for Best New Television Comedy 2001 and the South Bank Show award for Best Television Comedy 2001. It also received accolades at the Royal Television Society Awards, the Montreux Festival, the National Television Awards, the NME Awards and the GQ Awards, to name but a few.

Ash has worked for BBC Comedy for the past four years and his credits include a Radio 4 programme called *The Way It Is* in 1998 and *Yes Sir I Can Boogie* (and the pilot for BBC Two) in 1999 and 2000. In between the first

and second series of *The Office*, Ash produced *Up Late With Ralf Little* for BBC Choice, and joined up with Ricky Gervais once again for the Play UK series *Come Together With Ricky Gervais*.

Ash has also written columns for the *Independent On Sunday* and *Time Out*. He worked as a script editor on the first series of BBC Two’s *Comedy Nation*, and has even done a turn in front of the camera as presenter of Channel 4’s *Freak Out*.

Anil Gupta – Executive Producer

Anil Gupta began his television career as a freelance writer in 1991, working on ITV’s *Spitting Image* and with Mark Lamarr at Planet 24. He moved to the BBC’s TV Comedy Development team as a script editor and main writer on BBC Two’s *The Real McCoy* (series three, four and five) and was writer for *Xmas Night With The Stars*, again for BBC Two, in 1994.

He became a producer for BBC Comedy in 1995 and has since worked on and produced a string of high-profile programmes, including: *Ed Stone Is Dead*, *French And Saunders Easter Special 2002*, *The Office*, *Goodness Gracious Me*, *Goodness Gracious Me – India Special*, *The Fast Show Night*, *All The Fun Of The Mayor*, *The Way It Is*, and was also writer and presenter of *Why People Hate ... Pakis*, which was a documentary for Radio 4.

Goodness Gracious Me went on to win several awards for best radio and television comedy. Anil’s most recent production, *The Office*, has also won a raft of awards and has been highly praised. It’s won a Best Comedy award from the South Bank Show and the RTS, and won Best New Comedy at the British Comedy Awards. The Broadcasting Press Guild gave it a Best Entertainment award, with Bafta honouring it with a Best Sitcom award and Best Comedy Performance for Ricky Gervais.