

Arts & Books

On the offensive

Richard Herring grew a Hitler-style moustache for his last stand-up show. When it comes to comedy, everything is fair game, he tells **Simon Hardeman**

A Hitler moustache is a disconcerting thing, and there's one on the face of Richard Herring. In every other respect this stocky 41-year-old writer and comedian looks almost anonymous in a Hammersmith coffee shop in his gym-friendly T-shirt, sweatshirt-material top, and shoulder-length brown hair. But there, on his upper lip, is a couple of centimetres-square of facial hair that has more cultural and social baggage than a combined world tour of the Chinese State Opera, the Iranian parliament, and the North Korean missile display team.

It shouldn't be this way. It's just facial hair. Charlie Chaplin had one. Freddie Starr wore a fake one. And even swastikas have been co-opted by punk, and then worn by royals as a joke. And yet a real, bushy toothbrush 'tache still pushes buttons deep in the psyche. If you saw Herring recently on *Have I Got News For You*, then maybe you'll know what I mean.

Herring is famous for going to difficult places with his comedy, and I don't just mean the Glasgow Empire. His in-yeer-facial topiary is from his show *Hitler Moustache*, in which he tries to reclaim the growth from its place in the iconography of terror; the piece had a sell-out run in Edinburgh last year, and led to a spat in print with a critic who accused him of being part of a "new offensiveness" in comedy. Yet since his early years in a double act with Stewart Lee, Herring has become well known for envelope-pushing shows such as *Talking Cock*, inspired by *The Vagina Monologues*, for his no-holds-barred improvised and unedited weekly podcasts with Andrew Collins, and for writing Al Murray's TV breakthrough series as the ironically mega-patriotic Pub Landlord, *Time Gentlemen Please*. Now he's doing

an eight-week run at London's Leicester Square Theatre with *As It Occurs to Me*, a show that he writes anew every week and then podcasts, and he's about to publish *How Not to Grow Up*, a frank memoir that he hopes his parents won't read.

I wonder whether there is an element of self-indulgence in his relentless experimentation with taboos in front of paying audiences. "But you wouldn't go and see *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*," he counters in his hugely voluble, high-speed, largely unstoppable way, "and say, 'this is taking me to places I'd rather not go'. I don't understand why comedy has this thing where you're not allowed to discuss serious issues or upset people or shock people."

"What's interesting about *Hitler Moustache* [he has just finished its latest run] is that I've had very few walk-outs compared to other shows that I've done, and the people who have complained have all been cross about completely different things. If you're a sensible person with a world view then you understand that the joke earlier on about the Holocaust that you laughed at would offend someone else. In a show where I make glib jokes about the Holocaust, to get upset about paedophilia or a girl that's been kidnapped [he does a joke about Madeleine McCann] I think is to miss the bigger picture... I had a UKIP supporter and a big thugish skinhead and a Catholic woman all in the same week calling me a liberal as an insult, and I thought, I'm probably doing something right if all those people are annoyed with me for different reasons."

The son of a head teacher, Herring grew up in Somerset, "obsessed with sex and comedy from the age of three. I had a very happy upbringing; I love funny people and love to make them laugh. When everyone was listening to pop music I was listening to Monty Python records." He went to Oxford, where he met Stewart Lee, and they began performing as part of university revues in Edinburgh, where he had "a really horrible time. Keith Allen and all the stand-ups just vented their feelings at us for being Oxbridge. Ironically, all but



'With Hitler Moustache I've had very few walk-outs compared to other shows'

one of us were comprehensive kids who got good A-level results, so we were just the kind of people they should have been applauding."

He and Lee began writing for the BBC, contributing to Chris Morris and Armando Iannucci's *On the Hour*, where Steve Coogan's Alan Partridge was born, and then their own radio and TV vehicles, *Fist of Fun*, *Lee and Herring*, and *This Morning With Richard Not Judy*. But Herring's experience of the commissioning process was frustrating. He tells of the moment at a party when Coogan introduced him to Jane Root, one-time controller of BBC2, "and she just turned her back on me without saying anything, and I thought 'we [he and Lee] are probably not going to get another series.'" And *Time Gentlemen Please* was picked up by Sky after the BBC had overlooked it. All this has helped push him to his pioneering use of the internet.

"We've been doing the Collings and Herrin podcast for more than two years," he says (his and Andrew Collins's name are deliberately misspelt). "The internet is a very exciting way of doing material that's uncensored, and doesn't have to go through TV committees, and people aren't telling you what you can and can't do." It also avoids the Jonathan Ross/Russell Brand scenario: "Audiences choose to download them, so it's not as though it's going into an old lady's house and she's getting upset by it."

Herring is hugely prolific. He writes 365 blogs a year, 52 podcasts a year, 45 minutes of new material every week for *As It Occurs to Me* (so that's about six hours-worth this year) and several hours of other new material. So it's no surprise that he had more than one book in him.

"I had all these ideas for books, like a blogs book, and a dieting book, and a giving-up-drinking book, but my editor said, 'do it all in one book'. It's based on the year I turned 40. In the first six months I'm living this debauched and disgraceful life, and then I meet my girlfriend and calm down a bit. I don't really want my parents to read it but I suppose they will - I'm pretty honest about all the stuff I got up to."

I wonder if there are any subjects he won't go near. "I don't like people doing jokes about disabled people for no good reason, but I can still understand why they do them." He mentions the very recent furore about Frankie Boyle doing several minutes of stand-up about people with Down's syndrome. "You can understand why he's doing it, and it's part of his persona, so it's weird to get upset with him in a way, but I'd prefer people didn't do those kind of lazy jokes about disability."

And he says he really doesn't want to offend anyone, even though he agrees that the power and humour of some of his routines depend on the need for some people to be offended - otherwise, "it wouldn't be funny". When people are offended, "it kind of does upset me, but usually I've got an idea if I've gone too far." He has, he says, to be sure that what he's doing is defensible, stressing that the intent is important. And, ultimately, he says, he's the victim. "I have to walk around with this thing on my face for seven months of the year." With that, he's off to run at the gym. In a Hitler moustache. Well, they call it body-fascism.

'As It Occurs to Me', Leicester Square Theatre, London W1 (leicestersquaretheatre.com) every Monday, tonight to 21 June; the show's podcast and the Collings and Herrin podcasts are available free on iTunes. 'How Not to Grow Up' is published by Ebury Press



Top lip: Richard Herring in 'Hitler Moustache' (left); on stage in 'Lee & Herring', his show with Stewart Lee (right) **MATT CROSSICK/EMPICS ENTERTAINMENT/PA**

The Monday Book

The Mac pack make a killing



DARK BLOOD
By Stuart MacBride
HARPERCOLLINS, £14.99
Order for £13.49 from the Independent Bookshop: 08430 600 030

Stuart MacBride is corrupting the children of Britain. Not content with writing his lacerating crime fiction for adults, he is polluting the youth of the nation with his young-adult outing *Sawbones*, which had the Sunday papers fulminating against "a novel full of expletives, sex and violence". One paper even calculated how many times the F-word and its variants had been used: 89 times, to be exact.

Needless to say, this tsunami of moral outrage did absolutely no harm to sales of the book. And it might be argued that the softly spoken Scottish writer has done young adult readers something of a service. When they move on to MacBride's adult titles, they will be perfectly primed for the incendiary mix of gruesome incident and idiomatic writing that is the hallmark of the author's crime fiction and its tough copper, Logan McRae.

What better place for that legion of fresh-faced new readers to start than with the latest McRae, *Dark Blood*? As in such earlier outings as *Cold Granite* and *Broken Skin*, we're served up some of the grittiest crime-writing in the field. But while MacBride might seem to be setting out to make fellow Celts Val McDermid and Ian Rankin look as genteel as Alexander McCall Smith, there is much more to him than that. The McRae books sport some of the pithiest snapshots of modern urban life this side of Irvine Welsh, and the plotting has a cohesion that puts most writers in the genre to shame.

Logan McRae is handed a particularly unwelcome job. He is to be involved in the relocation of a vicious rapist, Richard Knox. The latter has served his time and found God, putting his many sexual assaults behind him, and is to be moved from his native Newcastle to McRae's beat of Aberdeen.

The auguries are not good, particularly as Edinburgh hard man Malk the Knife is muscling into the property-development boom, and a gangland accountant has gone missing. The elements are in place for violence and combustion. This is quintessential Stuart MacBride: tartan noir etched in the darkest of hues and garnished with dialogue so sharp you may cut yourself. But if you're the parent of a teenager, perhaps it would be best not to read any passages out loud. Or, if you do, don't tell the Sunday newspapers. **BARRY FORSHAW**

Barry Forshaw's book about Stieg Larsson, 'The Man Who Left Too Soon', is published by John Blake



Review the week's big film

Robin Hood

Email your comments about Ridley Scott's drama to cultureclub@independent.co.uk. The best will be published here on Thursday