

Camilla Cleese: 'People are looking to hate me'

Comedian Camilla Cleese is ready to emerge from the shadow of her Python father with a new show at Edinburgh



Camilla Cleese is appearing at Edinburgh this summer Photo: Rick Pushinsky

By Celia Walden

4:00PM BST 25 Jul 2014

When Camilla Cleese and her father John were driving to the Sundance film festival in Utah one year and stopping, intermittently, at roadside fast food joints, the 30-year-old comedian devised a plan to trick her father and "mess with his head".

"Every time we had to use the bathroom, I would run in ahead of him and say: 'When the guy with the moustache comes in would you please say: 'Aren't you that guy from Pink Panther 2?' He was so pissed," she chuckles. "I never even told him what I did."

Middle America might not be familiar with the full, glorious range of the Monty Python star's repertoire, but here in the UK, where John Cleese's daughter – from his second marriage to the late American artist, Barbara Trentham – is about to embark on her first British stand-up show, "American...ish", at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Camilla knows that she will have "big shoes, both literally and figuratively, to fill."

Which is perhaps why Cleese chose to start her career in the US – where over several years she has become a regular on the stand-up circuit, appearing at many of the country's top comedy venues. Los Angeles, where she lives on her own, has proved a tough place to break out, she says. "These dickhead Hollywood agents ruin the atmosphere because they never laugh so it's always so tense. Plus Angelenos are a very self-conscious crowd: they have to look cool all the time."

At first glance, it would be easy to assume that Cleese's brand of humour would be of the potty-mouthed and gender-based, Chelsea Handler variety. At 6 ft 1½ in, in a thigh-skimming black romper, she has the honeyed, extravagantly slim limbs and tousled blonde mane of a Victoria's Secret model. Watch some of her skits on YouTube, however, and you'll find her smart, dark and – despite the accent – surprisingly British in tone. (She's got Eddie Izzard's eye for quirky detail and Michael McIntyre's ability to turn the banal into the absurd).

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"Of course I've been very influenced by dad," she shrugs. "And although I do appreciate some of the wacky and weird American comics, I suppose my sense of humour is a little more cerebral and British: it doesn't require that kind of high energy to keep the audience engaged."

On stage, she plays down her looks ("I feel like I have to be self-deprecating off the top because people are looking to hate me – and anyway, to be funny as a woman you have to be willing to be unattractive"), shies away from gross-out comedy ("Nothing will shut me down faster than a comic who starts talking about farting or pooping") and has always refused to resort to facile shock value.

"A lot of women will go there and talk about their vaginas but for many people that's more of an uncomfortable laugh than an enjoyable one. Because they're not laughing at something that's genuinely funny. I want to stay away from anything that a lot of other women do. I feel like I've heard all the dating and complaining-about-men jokes before. And it's empowering for women not to be talking about men all the time – for us to find something more interesting to talk about. Which really isn't hard if you're talking about LA men..."

I tell her about my theory that nobody has sex in LA – too hard to find anyone as appealing as the person in the mirror. "I don't have sex in LA," she deadpans. "Because... well that's a whole other thing. But I guess there are a lot of drunk one night stands going on."

Cleese has done her share of fast living. She has spoken frankly in the past about the downward spiral she embarked on aged 11: the drink and the drugs that nearly killed her, the four stints in rehab. "A couple of times I thought I hit rock bottom," she says. But it was only in 2006 when she was arrested for cocaine possession and found herself lying on the floor of a jail cell in her underwear, covered in blood and vomit, that she knew she was done.

"I knew that I wanted to remember what that kind of despair and self-hatred felt and smelt like." Today, she has been sober for seven and a half years and has no desire to go back there. "I don't need drink anymore," she quips, serious beneath the levity. "I make plenty of bad decisions without it."



Many of the psychiatrists and therapists Cleese has sought help from over the years – starting from the age of four – might blame her parents' divorce (after nine years together the pair split up in 1990) for her troubles. "But people don't give children enough credit. Actually when my parents divorced I remember thinking: 'Oh good – they won't be yelling at each other any more and I can have two Christmasses'."

Instead, Cleese puts the "gaping hole" she felt inside growing up down to the move – away from her father in London – to Chicago, when she was 9 years old. "I felt like I didn't fit in anywhere because I was very

tall and lanky and smart and I had no social skills. Also I didn't have an emotional support network. My dad was in London and my mum was an alcoholic drug-addict with bi-polar disorder. You can't raise yourself. And believe me I tried."

Initially, a talent for show jumping saved her from the worst excesses. But when she quit abruptly at 18, and went to live with her father in Santa Barbara and was accepted at the University of California (Cleese calls it "the University of Cocaine, Sex and Booze") her addictions really took hold.

A strained relationship with her father's third wife, therapist Alyce Faye Eichelberger, didn't help and when he took a tough love approach, refusing to see his daughter until she had vowed to sober up, it was the hardest period of her life.

"When you've got a famous parent, everyone thinks you're born so lucky, but I would have given it all back just to see him every day. I idolised dad, but it's hard when everyone puts your parent on a pedestal because sometimes they don't seem human even to you. And, well, I don't want to sound ungrateful but if you do decide to follow in their footsteps everyone is expecting you to fail."

I would be saddened to think that Cleese's surname would inspire anything but warmth and intrigue in Edinburgh next week – particularly off the back of her father's sell-out Monty Python reunion tour. But with the confidence she lacked for so many years now restored by stand-up, I'm pretty sure she can take on a few hecklers.

"I remember the first open mic I did at this big, intimidating club in LA," she smiles. "After I got down off the stage the MC said: 'Well that was kind of entertaining for a woman – but a round of applause because how many people would f--- that girl, eh?' You know what? I just let it fuel my fire."

American...ish, starring Camilla Cleese, Sarah Tiana, Cort McCown & Special Guests will take place at the Gilded Balloon, Edinburgh between 6th and the 13th August. For more information please go to www.gildedballoon.co.uk or www.edfringe.com

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