

the press conference with MICHAEL BARRYMORE

Often, it's only when you are forced to think about someone, in preparation for an interview, that you realise how many preconceptions already exist in your brilliant mind. Take Michael Barrymore. I hadn't ever given him much conscious thought, but subliminally I had actually formed a fairly strong negative view from the mulch of stories over 20-odd — very odd — years. I'm sure I'm not alone.

There was all that irritating zany stuff at his primetime peak during the '80s and early '90s, with *Strike It Lucky* and *My Kind of People*. The inevitable showbiz self-destruction was under way behind the scenes and he began rehab' in '94. Then in '95, Barrymore came out in bizarre style in an East End pub by singing, to the tune of 'New York, New York', "Start spreading the news, I'm gay today." A messy divorce from wife Cheryl, his manager and all-round minder, followed. She died from lung cancer in 2005.

Barrymore's personal meltdown has been relentless and very public, but the serious stuff happened when 31-year-old Stuart Lubbock drowned in the pool at his house in Roydon, Essex, on 31 March, 2001. Few will not be familiar with the details or, indeed, the inaccurate details. The inquest, six months later, recorded an open verdict, but Barrymore continued to be targeted by what he says are largely false accusations about that night.

This year has been something of a comeback for Barrymore, thanks to his teary success in *Celebrity Big Brother*. He is now touring in Bill Kenwright's revival of *Scrooge* — *The Musical*. Now 54, Barrymore has been clean for five and half years and is happily settled with his partner, Shaun Davis.

Incredibly skinny and craggy beyond his years, Barrymore looks like he has done his time at the Fully Fucked Up Club.

What's he like? He's a bit strange in an ill-at-ease sort of way, and he appears very fragile and nervy. But he is sincere, open, and I'm sure he has been widely misunderstood simply because of his absurdly mumbling speech.

I know it's a cheap line, but Barrymore is basically 'awight'.



It's tough to know where to begin with you and the press, Michael, so let's start with your worst experience. Which story was that?

Well, it has got to be the *Sunday Mirror* one — "You Are A Killer" [splash, 15 September, 2002]. That headline was way over the line, and was absolutely as bad as it could get. I thought I had bad press when I first got clobbered by the *Daily Mirror* in that drink and drugs clinic in Baltimore. I thought, that is it, the career is gone, but it wasn't. When I came out in the White Swan pub it was pretty bad, then all the divorce stuff with Cheryl, but all that paled into insignificance with the Stuart Lubbock situation. When the *Sunday Mirror* did that front page it was the worst, unbelievable.

I had to see it for legal reasons, because it was so extreme. We put a formal complaint in through lawyers to — is it Tina Weaver? [Yes, the editor of the SM]. She wrote back saying we refute that totally and that it doesn't say that in the sub-text. Well, people driving past in a car don't see the sub-text, they just read, "You Are A Killer".

So what happened with that, and how do you feel about it now?

I dropped it, I let it go. I would have won, absolutely no doubt, but what is the point? I have taken newspapers to court, what, four times, and I've won every time, but what do you win? It takes years, and when I'm finally on the way to court a mate will go, "Where are you off to?" "Oh, I'm suing such-and-such paper." And he goes, "Really? Over what headline?" Also, I will pay £150,000 to a barrister to get £50,000. What is the point?

But, do you know, I don't think there is any editor — including Tina Weaver — who has been party to any of those stories over the years that I would have any problem sitting down and talking with. And I'm

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not just saying that for effect or to curry favour, because I don't need to. And they don't need me either. They have got plenty of others that they can do whatever they want to — people they can promote, or not promote. The world doesn't centre around Michael Barrymore. I don't have a problem with them. Even if Tina walked in now, I'd ask if she wanted a tea or coffee and I might say, "That headline was not very nice. I don't forgive you, because you don't need forgiveness, but you owe me a fair headline."

I find it amazing that there is no bitterness or anger when I think of the stick you've taken. If it's true, it's certainly highly admirable.

It is true. I have got no bitterness. Revenge is an indulgence of the weak. It is a waste of time. You can't spend 20 years of your life saying you want to be recognised and, when you are, say you don't like it. It is showbusiness.

What I get fed up with more than the papers themselves is the people in the business going on about the papers. People getting upset for me, going "Oh it's terrible what they are doing to Michael." It's like second-hand fame. I go, "Er, yeah, it's probably a bit unfair," but if I spent my time going through it all line by line I would have no energy left to focus on what I do.

Apart from "You Are A Killer", the papers reported on my shenanigans and I was the one that fed that all the way, so I feel absolutely culpable. I dug the hole myself — it wasn't of their doing. If I am brutally honest, I'm not sure that if I was an editor at the time that I wouldn't have gone down the same road myself. The stories were too juicy to turn down, but the trouble was they kept topping them until it was like a bursting balloon, and it ended up exploding. There's not enough paper to list



by Rob McGibbon

MICHAEL'S NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers

I was brought up in Bermondsey in south London. It's a very working class area, and my family always got the *Mirror*. I don't buy any papers at all. It is healthier not to read them, including the good stuff. I have always kept away from them. I don't like to be influenced one way or the other. I think papers are very clever the way they play on words. I think that is a real art, a style.

Magazines

I only buy car magazines or anything to do with interior decoration. *Car Magazine* for the more upmarket stuff and in-depth interviews and *Autocar* — that for the general car news. I like the car I've got, a Toureg — that's a Volkswagen 4x4. It's got a V10 in it.

Interior wise I like mags such as *Wallpaper**. It has got a good mix. I remember when it first came out I was quite impressed with the mag's approach. I am not into the gossip celeb mags. There is one American mag — *The Robb Report* — which I get, a lifestyle magazine I used to pick up in America. I started getting it there years ago.



the stories about me that aren't true. They suddenly become fact, and then all the columnists get stuck in, which makes them folklore. But I don't hold anything against the press.

Surely the media's reporting of the Stuart Lubbock tragedy has hurt you? It has been suggested that the coverage was essentially homophobic. Do you agree?

I did not personally feel it was homophobic. Every time that has come up, it has been by other people going, "If it had been a straight couple, it would have been reported differently." Having listened to them, I would say, "Yeah, you're probably right," but I don't sit around trying to work it out. A lot of people are of the opinion that the *Daily Mail* is homophobic, but I find it hard to believe that an entire office can be swayed like a cult — unless the *Daily Mail* is a cult and we don't know. You know more about it than me, it's your world, is it a cult? [Ahem, I'll take the *Fifth* on that one, yer Honour!]

All I can say is that I have learnt that it is very dangerous to judge a person when you see them walking down a street. We — me included — suffer from the disease of perception. If someone looks a certain way, talks like that, or drives this car, we make judgements based on nothing.

What are some of the key factual errors in the reporting of the Stuart Lubbock tragedy that you would like to clear up?

The fact that there was absolutely no gay orgy. It was not a wild party. There was no screaming on the night from anybody, except from the girls when they saw Stuart laying on the side.

Also, Stuart's injuries were not 'horrific'. That word was never used by the police or in any pathologist's report. Those reports say there were lacerations [of Lubbock's anus]. The word 'horrific' was only brought in by the media.

And it was reported I rang my PR that night. I've never had a PR. I rang my PA — my personal assistant, Mike Brown. He is the guy who was always with me when I was working. Saying I rang my PR after something like that, there is nothing more calculating and cold, is there? Somebody has just drowned in your pool and you ring your PR guy? It's something straight out of some Hollywood film — and not a nice one, a horror film.

I ran back in the house to get Jonathan [Kenney, his then-boyfriend]... he's done life saving... Simon [Shaw] and James [Futters] jumped in. I didn't rush to go away. I was frozen to the spot. I was not too sure

Michael Barrymore's FANTASY FLYERS

There are no Fantasy Flyers this week for Barrymore, as they were far from awight.

Television



PHOTOGRAPH: BBC

I like to take news off Teletext. I don't sit down and look at the news. I don't watch much telly. I am quite selective. Entertainment wise, I watch things like Catherine Tate (left), *Will and Grace*. And I like *Little Britain*. I do know what is going on in the news, but I get it mostly from radio.

I like to see my version of things, like me doing *Scrooge*. The same goes for reviews, whether people are for me or against me. I accept that people have their point of view.

Radio

I get Five Live down the computer or cable.

Web

No. It is used in the office, but I am not any good at that stuff. I haven't got the patience. I can write free-hand quicker than I can type. I very rarely use it. I am not computer literate at all. [I use] a Bic pen and an A4 pad, and get it converted by somebody.

what to do. There was nothing I could do to help with the body. I would have made things worse. I couldn't have jumped in to save him, because I can't swim... then you get people saying, "Why have you got a swimming pool when you can't swim?" Well, they come with houses like that.

Simon and James said, there's nothing you can do. I got hold of Mike to tell him that somebody had drowned and that when the police come I will be at Simon and James's [house in Roydon]. That was just at the end of the drive. It's a small village. Of course I regret that [leaving the scene]. I didn't know what to do. I mean, everything had been taken care of. There was nothing more I could do seemingly for Stuart. I didn't know if he was alive or dead, I hoped he was alive. It was only about 10 minutes later I was being interviewed by police.

What is the situation with you and Stuart's father, Terry?

After *Big Brother*, *The Sun* put us together and we sat down and we had an agreement to go on. He goes, "I know you had nothing to do with it." Then two days later the goalposts get moved when he goes to another newspaper who want to have a go back at me. I say to him, "If you know I had nothing to do with it, as you have clearly stated, why do you keep using my name?" And he says, "How else am I going to get publicity?" My immediate reaction — I thought, Christ, how are we going to get anywhere with this if I am his lever to get things sorted?

All the time, I have respect for him. I go, Hang about, the guy has lost his son, he is distraught, he is traumatised, so whatever has happened to me, I knock into second place. But after five and a half years, there is only so much I will take with people coming at me.

Where do you think it went wrong with you and the media? Was there a starting point and a reason?

It started when I split from Cheryl and I came out. Before then, if you ever interviewed me, Cheryl was there between me and the journalist. You only really interviewed her talking about me. She controlled it. I was very free, and if I went off on one she would jump in and laugh it off, "Oh he doesn't mean that." I never really realised I should have spoken up, but I am very bad at one-on-one situations, so it suited me. Put me in front of a crowd and I'm fine, but in an interview, I'm terrible.

I never realised how much Cheryl looked after me with the media. She told me I didn't need a publicist, but really she was doing it. My actual relationship with the press was very good, but it really changed after that night I came out. I didn't plan it, and the next day I saw "Barrymore: I'm gay" on the front of the *Evening Standard*, and I thought, Oh shit.

Things started to change in those years when



I went wild and didn't have Cheryl's protection. I didn't really appreciate the power of the papers, I just thought, Oh well, if that's what they want to say, let them. Suddenly the words 'ramble' and 'unpredictable' were in the dialogue. In the stories about me there was suddenly a few lines before you got to the name Barrymore.

Are there any stories that often get re-published as fact that you would like to correct?

Blimey, there are so many there's not enough paper. The fact that Cheryl and I fought physically is one. I find that hard to take because it never happened. She put it in her book, so it is not the newspapers' fault, they were just reporting what she was saying. But it has become folklore even though it was completely untrue.

There is one I would like to clear up. That is when an MP asked a question in Parliament saying I was a disgrace because I brought a book out to capitalise on the death of Stuart Lubbock. I was under contract to the BBC for a book 18 months before, and it was nothing to do with what had happened. The book was pulled anyway, it got too heavy for the BBC, but the trouble is, he raised that question and then all the columnists started having a go at me as if it was fact. Before you know it, everyone believes it.

Out of everything, is there one misconception that is forever perpetuated in the media that you would like to disappear?

The one that I wish would change is that I am out of it all the time and that I have lost the plot. I am more together now than I have been for a long time. I just want to be judged now on what I do for a living, not how good I am at giving interviews. I have never been good at interviews, but I am getting better now that I am making a conscious effort. I used to mumble away trying to find the perfect answer, or be funny. Now I just relax a bit and say what I feel.

Career-wise, do you think this is the beginning of something better, and would you say you are finally happy again?

I know it has been a while since anyone saw me do something, but I have been working my butt off on *Scrooge* and I think I am doing the piece well. Bill Kenwright asked me if I wanted to do it as an entertainer or as an actor, and I said I want to act it. And I feel good about the way it is working. I don't want to overplay how important this is to me. I have my life back, I am back on song and that is what matters most. But I want this to go well and if I was a fighter going into the ring, I would fancy myself to have a result, save the ceiling falling in.

I think I have got a talent. It is very easy to forget that I am a performer, because for too long I've only had a talent for getting on the front pages for the wrong reason. It is almost as if the front pages have become my career, and what I actually did for a living before became secondary. That needs to get back the other way round.

I am happy now, yes. When I have been asked that in the past I always wavered a bit, but I can say yes with conviction now. I am extremely happy. I am not worried about what is to come and I have no fear of fear itself. One of my problems in the past is that I used to be too much of a pessimist. Now I'm going to be on the more optimistic foot. I feel really good and I am ready for it.

I've only gone and got myself a bloody blog!
If you're very bored, do jog by some time.
<http://robmcgibbon.blogspot.com>