Barrymore is basically ‘awight’. I had never 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.

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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.

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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 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.

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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 bad 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 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, saying “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 trapping them until it was like a bursting balloon, and it ended up exploding. There’s not enough paper to list
I was brought up in Bermondsey in south London. It's a very working class area, and my family always got the basic income. 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.

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. I did not personally feel it was homophobic. Every time that has come up, it has been by other people. I did not personally feel it was homophobic. Every time that has come up, it has been by other people. I did not personally feel it was homophobic. Every time that has come up, it has been by other people. I did not personally feel it was homophobic. Every time that has come up, it has been by other people. I did not personally feel it was homophobic. Every time that has come up, it has been by other people.

The fact that there was absolutely no gay orgy. It was only brought in by the media. 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 though it was completely untrue.

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 Roudoud]. 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 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.

I watched 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 Croucher. The same goes for reviews, whether people review me or against me. I accept that people have their point of view.

Radio
I get Five Live down the computer or cable.

Television
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 Croucher. The same goes for reviews, whether people review me or against me. I accept that people have their point of view.

Out of everything, is there one misconception that is forever perpetuated in the media that is quite tiresome?

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 not more together now than I have ever been. I just want to be judged now on what I do for a living, not how good I am at giving interviews. Things 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.

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

I know 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, not how good I am at giving interviews. Things 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.