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Where in the world is
**Morgan
Spurlock?**

The Interrogation of
Alicia Witt

Last Night with
Moby

Fashion with
**Kate
French**

ICON
Anne Rice

**Eddie
Izzard**



PLUS:

Jammin' with the
L.A. Derby Dolls

A Backstage Pass to
Point Break, Live!

Transformation L.A.
1 Rail is Better Than 2

Eddie Izzard

Stripped Bare

words by Susan Michals, photos by Robert Todd Williamson



“You’ve heard that Frank Sinatra story, haven’t you?” asks Eddie Izzard as he lingers over a steaming cup of black coffee. This

guy in way back when in some Hollywood restaurant goes up to Frank Sinatra and says, ‘Hey Frank, I’m with my girlfriend and do you think you could just come over and say hello – pretend that you know me?’ and Frank Sinatra says, ‘Sure, I’ll do it.’ So a few minutes later, Frank Sinatra comes over and says, ‘Hey Jerry, how you doing?’ and the guy says, ‘Fuck off Frank, can’t you see I’m busy?’ Obviously, it’s probably not true, but it makes for interesting conversation.”

We’re sitting just outside of Trader Vic’s, overlooking the pool at the Beverly Hilton. Just Eddie Izzard and myself. “This is so Hollywood, isn’t it?” he muses, sounding like a true Brit who still has not quite adjusted to our 80-degree weather in the middle of March. Just then, a fan approaches and asks for a quick autograph. Gratefully Izzard signs away. As the woman departs, he leans in and says, “I set this whole thing up before you came. Someone else’ll be coming up asking for an autograph again in about five minutes.” Izzard is still quite humbled by his celebrity status, even though he has long been distinguished as a cult icon for his stand-up shows, most notably, “Dress to Kill,” for which he won two Emmys. Now with the success of his FX series, *The Riches*, Izzard finds himself frequently in situations like today’s signature request. “One’s ego would like people to fawn all over you – but I really like where it is at the moment. You hear about Brad (Pitt) walking around and people screaming...I kind of like being able to walk down the street. The people I think I’d like to have a chat with come up to me and say, ‘I like what you’re doing.’ I’m trying to make the work worthwhile for those people.”

Here is a man propelled by a great case of the curious mind; for fans of his stand-up shows, there is certain sanctity to the Izzardian type of humor, as it is typically not found in the U.S. He is an ebullient connoisseur of life and all its idiosyncratic moments, a tangential messenger who entertainingly interweaves one subject with the next – giving us a labyrinth of amusements. “I call it *sex...with Martians*,” he says. “It’s stand-up, although the image of stand-up in America is all dick jokes, but in Britain, it’s a highly revered art form.” Surprisingly, he does most of his thinking onstage – i.e., no prep -- even though his shows can last close to two hours in length. “Every show is a living breathing show that just keeps changing every time. I have to get up there and just do it. It’s rather lazy; that’s why it’s conversational.”

That kind of quick wit would have made him one hell of an attorney, “I would’ve loved to have been a lawyer – which is great because on *The Riches* I get to play a fake lawyer all the time.” On the FX dramedy (now in its second season), Izzard is Wayne Malloy, patriarch over a motley clan of grifters with wife Dahlia (Minnie Driver). After a freak car accident, the Malloy’s assume the identities of the two victims, lawyer Doug and wife Cherien Rich, complete with the cookie cutter prefab home in a suburban community. It is your standard fish out of water story, and even though it seems they don’t belong, the Malloys soon fit right in. Yet with the advent of Season 2, the family finds their idyllic slice of suburbia – *Eden Falls* – aptly named. “The stakes are going to get much higher,” says Izzard, regarding the upheaval facing him and his family of gypsy travelers. “This deal pops up with a massive pile of money that Wayne wasn’t prepared for. Dahlia starts trying to find her own truth on a personal level – and (begins) treating her life in a different way. She starts lying to Wayne and he starts lying back

Continued on page 25...










photo courtesy of FX Networks

to her. The kids (played by Shannon Marie Woodward, Noel Fisher, and Aidan Mitchell) start going on different trajectories as well. So the bolts and the hinges are coming undone." This season is on the short side, a mere seven episodes due to the writer's strike. But that's part of what makes this season so intriguing: even in its condensed form, the show seems like it has really been honed and found its direction. Izzard fervently agrees, "We know where we're going this season; we keep ramping it up with every episode." The Riches – or rather, the Malloys, are so infinitely seductive to watch because they never play it safe – they're too busy playing it fake. They want what all of us want – the American Dream. Unfortunately, the Malloys are untethered spirits more enamored with risk – something that could eventually turn Eden Falls into nothing less than perilously boring suburban trappings. They rebuff complacency, much like Izzard himself. For years producers wanted to cast him as the funny man, but Izzard held out – he yearned for drama. There were spurts of dramatic supporting roles in films like *Velvet Goldmine* and *Cat's Meow*. In 2003 he was nominated for a Tony for his leading role on Broadway in "A Day in the Death of Joe Egg." But when it came to television, no one saw him as the straight man. *The Riches* has given Izzard the dramatic recognition he's been after for so long – yet his stand-up fans will be glad to know this doesn't mean he's abandoning the comedic ship – it is still of paramount importance. "I hold comedy behind like... The Duke of Wellington kept a whole bunch of his troops on the other side of the hill so Napoleon couldn't see them... there's my military analogy for you. (laughs) I just want to keep pushing myself and getting out there and do more dramatic roles. For comedy, what I would like to do is something like *Little Miss Sunshine*, which is exactly what *The Riches* is – the tone is very similar, dark and bleak, but sometimes you stop and laugh at it."

Though he has wrapped *The Riches* series for now, he is about to embark on a 46-city tour across America entitled, "Stripped". In the promotional poster, Izzard's look harkens back ever so slightly to his old dress up days of "Dress to Kill" and "Circle" – where he would perform in drag – this being a personal choice, not a gimmick. There's an open lacy shirt with a bit of flounce and only a hint of makeup. "It's a bit of paring down," he said. "I'm not going in girlie mode, I'm going in boy mode this time around. I'm happily wandering between the two." For Izzard, this tour is also about paring down, keeping it simple and back to the bare bones of what he's talking about. "I'm trying to strip away certain ideas I don't think are very useful, like formal religions. These religions are ideas and philosophies by humans; I don't feel they (these ideas) were handed down by a guy with a beard, who lives in the clouds somewhere, who never turns up ever. And who knows if he's ever going to show up anyway. I know a lot of the world disagrees. I think it's great to be spiritual, and I think it's great to live your life, y'know, based on 'treat others as you want to be treated yourself'. That one rule, you could really live your whole life on." 

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