

# Matt Lipsey on Directing Comedy

Wednesday 19 January 2011 by James

Matt Lipsey is one of the most respected and prolific directors of British TV comedy. He has worked with many of the UK's best comic actors including Steve Coogan, Rob Brydon, Julia Davies, Matt Lucas, Reece Shearsmith, Reeves and Mortimer, and Dawn French with his credits including such hit shows as *Armstrong & Miller*, *Human Remains*, *Little Britain*, *Jekyll*, *Saxondale*, and *Psychoville*. We caught up with Matt to ask him about the pitfalls of directing comedy and for a sneak preview of the highly anticipated second series of *Psychoville*.

**You've worked with some of the biggest comic stars in British TV. How easy, or difficult, is it to direct them?**

In my experience, perhaps not surprisingly, every actor is different, and so some more difficult than others. However, they are all human and so there is always a way to find common ground and build a working relationship. This has to be based upon trust which clearly must work both ways.

There is a tired old phrase suggesting that all actors are insecure, welcome to the club called 'humanity', we all are in some way or other, but it helps to remember that no matter how big a name you might be working with the same holds true. My job is made just a bit easier by having a decent body of work so that when an actor is working with me for the first time they can look to that and hopefully think 'well he made all those others look good so...' This is the bottom line for us all, as we rely on the last job for the next.

**Many directors and actors have stated that comedy is more difficult than drama? Would you agree with this?**

As a very loose generalization I find it is harder to make someone laugh than it is to make them scared or make them cry. Its all bloody hard to get absolutely right (and even that is a matter of opinion), only a few manage it and of those that do they can't always sustain it.

The mechanics, the process of production is more or less the same in either drama or comedy (studio based sit-coms being one obvious exception), but in terms of actual content I would say comedy is less forgiving. This is not just down to what I do in terms of casting well and helping to set the tone and then maintain it, creating the rhythms that lead an audience to a laugh without signaling it (unless that's your intention) and building a world that works and is cohesive within its own terms. There is then the audience to factor in – the great unknown. The general public seems to be more likely to let a drama show just sort of wash over them whereas they are often more demanding of their comedy.

**What kind of advice would you give to anyone wanting to pursue a career in directing comedy for TV?**

There are many ways in and none of them are easy. What I can say from personal experience is learn to direct actors. It has actually shocked me the number of times I have heard it said of other comedy directors 'they have a really strong vision but don't seem to be able to communicate it to the actors'. I know this is easier said than done but it has become a hell of a lot easier since my beginnings now that the technology is so much more accessible.

If you are not a writer, find one, or just use an existing script, hook up with a drama school or actors you know and make something. Nothing at all will teach you better than actual hands on directing and it really doesn't matter at what level you are doing it, put film through a camera (an almost archaic term but sounds better than record digital information onto a memory card).