

EUROFILE

Performing stand-up in a foreign language can be no laughing matter. Aspiring comedian **TIM PARFITT** takes some tips from someone who has already mastered it, the ultimate European comic, Eddie Izzard



EDDIE INSPIRED ME TO LEARN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE OF STAND-UP

An hour before he went on stage in Barcelona, I asked Eddie Izzard how people pronounced his name in Spanish. He said he wasn't sure, but that in America it was often 'Is-ud', and in France, 'Eezazzard'. I told him that it was probably 'Eethard' in Spanish. 'Eethhard', he lisped back, practising it. He asked me how they pronounced my own name. 'Teecem Parfeece', I said. He stared at me as if I was nuts, but he eventually laughed.

We'd been sharing some red wine in his hotel, about a hundred yards from Barcelona's L'Antic 'café-theatre', an intimate venue with a capacity of just 120, far short of Madison Square Garden's 20,000 or the Hollywood Bowl's 17,500 – venues that he has also previously sold out. We were talking about performing stand-up comedy in a language other than English. You see, it is one of my own New Year's resolutions, or goals – to perform stand-up in Spanish (I will explain) – and I'd been given the opportunity to learn from one of the world's greatest comedians – 'the lost Python' himself, as John Cleese has called him.

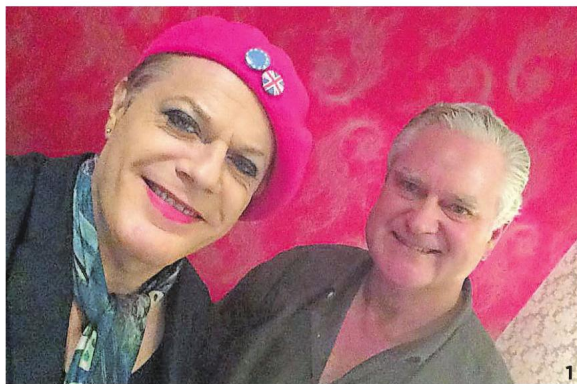
Eddie Izzard, or 'Eethard' – stand-up comedian, actor, marathon runner, political and charity campaigner – was now on his fourth language. Over the years, he has successfully performed in French and German (as well as English, obviously), and he was now embarking on Spanish, which was to include 10 shows in Barcelona, and a further 11 in Madrid – although not consecutively. He'd fitted the shows in as part of an autumn-winter 'Force Majeure Reloaded' tour (in English) that included visits to Amsterdam, Antwerp, Prague, Copenhagen, Istanbul, Reykjavik and Zurich, among others.

In fact he's performed 'Force Majeure' in 29 countries – 'a comedy world record', he claims. Earlier this year he also performed a '333' show, meaning a performance of 'Force Majeure' three times in three languages (German, French and English) over three one hour shows, in support of the 'Stronger in Europe' campaign. He doesn't do things by half-marathon, does Izzard... more like 27 full marathons in 27 days, to be precise...

Why? 'Why does he set himself such challenges?' I asked. He replied (as usual) with a stream of rambling, whimsical, Izzard-like observations, as if he was already on stage. 'It's not a challenge, they're not 'challenges' – they are challenging to do – you could say, how many peas can you get on a spoon? – or how many people can we get in a mini? That would be a challenge. What I'm doing is that I'm proud of my country but I'm reaching out to other countries – can you learn from us, and can we learn from you?'

Yes, Eddie, but is it difficult? Do you get nervous performing in Spanish? Are you nervous now? I ask. 'Now?' he replied, sipping his wine, leaning back in his armchair, dressed in knee-high stiletto boots and a lovely pink beret. He didn't look very nervous. 'No, I'm not. Well, I can't get nervous in English because I've moved the line... so now the Spanish has to be my nervousness. Humiliation can be a problem, but I've found that even if I fail, it is acceptable, because who the hell is doing this in their fourth language? I was doing it in German once when I just forgot it all and I had to get my iPad and read it off the iPad... but it was acceptable. There's an extra bit I want to do tonight which I haven't actually got in my head yet, but I'd quite like to do it.'

He then got his iPad out and started to practise part of the routine. Whilst the Barcelona show was set to be an hour in length, only the last 15 minutes (more or less the entire 'encore' section) would be in Spanish. The plan was that step-by-step, or



(1) Eddie Izzard and Tim Parfitt (2) Comedian Eddie Izzard performs in the comedy tent during the Latitude Festival at Henham Park, near Southwold, Suffolk (3) Tim on stage. Photos: Contributed/PA

'poco a poco', the 15 minutes would increase to 20 or 25 minutes as he 'hopefully improved' with each performance, culminating in a possible half-hour of material in Spanish by the end of the Madrid leg of the tour.

I wanted to test him so I asked him a question in Spanish. He couldn't reply. 'I haven't started learning the language yet,' he explained. 'I can hardly speak it at the moment. But my brother has translated the show into Spanish and we've got this radical method in which I learn it like a play... as an actor I can do that.' He continued to read out loud from his iPad, learning it verbatim, and memorising the pronunciation, as if learning the lines for an acting role.

Far, far, far from the dizzy heights of Eddie Izzard's comedic genius or multi-lingual performance world records, I will now own up to the fact that I tried stand-up comedy myself 30 times during a 12-month period not so long ago. I 'performed' (in English) in Barcelona (where I live most of the time), Madrid, London, New York and Edinburgh. It all started with Logan Murray's brilliant 'Comedy Workshop' course – continued for a while with a television documentary crew following me to various 'open mics' in London and the famous Comedy Store to shoot for a possible fly-on-the-wall pilot, and 'culminated' with me delivering four lunchtime 'shows' of 45 minutes each during the Edinburgh Free Fringe Festival. I thought it would end there. It was an experience I will never forget but also one I thought I'd never repeat. Stand-up, however, is addictive, and I'm going to have another crack at it. In English and Spanish.

I find Izzard's comedy very funny at the best of times, but as he started to rehearse his Spanish performance in front of me, I was in hysterics. His comedy is both intelligent and silly-stupid, almost Monty Python at times. Listening and watching 'Eethard' trying out a routine in memorised Spanish about God issuing instructions from on-high yet being ignored, because He speaks in an unimpressive high-pitched voice, it reminded of my own initial problems with Spanish pronunciation – especially my inability to roll my 'R's' vigorously enough. My first office address in Madrid was Serrano Three ('Serrano Tres') – totally impossible for me to pronounce. It used to come out of my mouth as 'Sir Rhino Twes', and taxi drivers would often drop me off in a street called 'Zurbano'. I eventually gave up trying to say the number 'tres', and changed it to number five ('cinco') – easier to pronounce – and walk the extra block.

Izzard could have also benefited from the same elderly Spanish secretary I once had, a formidable, matronly figure who thought she was being helpful by teaching me

Spanish tongue-twisters – 'trabalenguas'. There was one in particular designed to help me roll those Spanish 'R's. It was: 'Cuánta madera roería un roedor si los roedores royeran madera?' ... which means, 'How much wood would a rodent gnaw, if rodents would gnaw wood?' It always came out of my mouth as 'wodents wawwing wood'. I won't go into the details here about how I'd pronounce the Spanish tongue-twister of 'Pepe Peña peeling potatoes, cutting a pineapple, blowing a whistle, cutting a pineapple (again), peeling potatoes (again), good old Pepe Peña.' I will save it for my stand-up in Spanish.

Izzard describes himself as a 'British-European', and refers to Brexit as 'Brexhate'. He admits that once his show has been 'sculptured' into Spanish, he'll be able to tour and perform in Cuba and Mexico – in fact anywhere in Latin and South America – but that's not the real reason he's doing it.

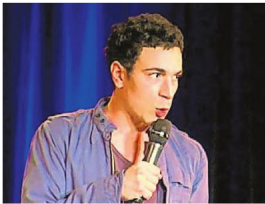
"We need to do positive things to move humanity forwards," he started to ramble, Izzard-like, again. "At a time when half our country voted to stay and the other half leave, or actually 'backwards' – we're never going to get anywhere by walking backwards – I'm proud of my country. But here's me talking in your language – and the French are performing in English, the Germans are performing in Spanish, the Russians, Dutch, Scandinavians, Spanish, Italians. This has never happened in the history of the world – and no-one really gives a monkey's. But I give a monkey's."

"I give a monkey's, too," I told him – and I believe there are many others out there, as well. Increasingly in the world of comedy, at least, there are no language or border restrictions, thanks to the likes of Izzard showing us the way. On Logan Murray's intensive stand-up comedy course that was held in Barcelona over a long weekend, I

THE COMICS WHO CAN MAKE FOREIGNERS LAUGH

Yacine Bellhouse

The Frenchman is something of a protégé of Izzard's. He has performed in the UK, with an act that is mostly a translation of his French material, though references are changed. The pace of the language is different, he says, with English phrases shorter and quicker in getting to the point. Some subtleties that might amuse a French crowd can be lost. The rewards of performing in a foreign language are greater, though. "When I get a laugh, I'm happy three times more than in French."



Michael Mittermeier

Made a name for himself in Germany with his comedy show Zapped (in which US television series MacGyver became a running gag), before heading overseas. Another foreign comic who has been championed by Izzard, in pursuit of his single European market in stand-up



Igor Meersen

The first Russian stand-up at the Edinburgh Festival, where he was billed as the 'Yuri Gagarin of Russian Comedy'. When he came over for the festival, in 2014, he found that comedy does not always translate. He had to ditch his translated act, for a new one. "Russian is very flexible, we can mix words in a way that is needed, put them in different places so that you keep the punchline unexpected. You can't do that in English," he said.



was locked away with seven other wannabe stand-ups from England, Spain, Germany and Sweden.

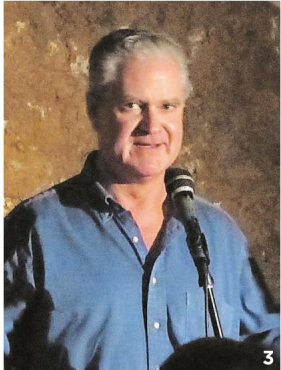
Murray, one of Europe's best comedy tutors (his 'students' have included Greg Davies, Josh Widdicombe and Rhod Gilbert) has run comedy workshops in Madrid, Barcelona, Mallorca, Berlin, Malta, Dubai, Greece and Shanghai. "Stand-up evenings might also be gaining popularity around countries without a tradition for it because they are relatively easy and cheap events to set up," says Murray. "One mic, one light, a primitive sound system and away you go."

Whilst Izzard is touring in French, German and Spanish, top European comedians who can perform in English are also finding a circuit of pan-European gigs opening up for them. "They might be playing to a largely ex-pat crowd," says Murray, "but all that means these days is that the people are not originally from that town or city."

Top Barcelona comedian, Xavier Castells, a Comedy Central regular, together with ex-pat Chris Groves, part-time teacher and stand-up, have recently started 'Find your Funny' courses for Spanish and Catalan comedians to perform in English - and they've agreed to coach me in my attempt to perform in Spanish. "The comedy scene is buzzing in Barcelona and Madrid," says Groves, "and you can get away with more stuff whilst performing in another language."

Stand-up is hard. Very hard. I have the utmost respect for anyone who tries it, even more so for anyone who succeeds at it - in any language. I've had people laugh and applaud me, but I've also been heckled and, much worse, I've stood in front of an 'open mic' audience in New York for five very long minutes whilst no-one laughed at all.

I received one last tip from Izzard before he went on stage in Barcelona. "I always like to put an English swear word right in the middle of a French or German word,"



he said. "In Spanish, I'm putting a swear word in the middle of 'entonces' [meaning 'therefore'] - so it becomes 'en-ferking-tonces'."

I'm hoping that if the non-Spanish speaking 'Eethard' can memorise enough Spanish pronunciation to perform his routines about human sacrifice, squirrels with guns, Julius Caesar and caesar salads, moles digging for gold, or Charles I wearing a spaniel as a wig - then I might just be able to raise a laugh (or at least a grin) about my own Spanish speech impediment, or how Madrid's eating hours played havoc on my digestive system. But I can't promise. Watch this space.

■ Tim Parfitt is an author and journalist whose first book, A Load of Bull, related his adventures in Madrid, as head of Conde Nast, launching Vogue & GQ in Spain. The Barcelona Connection is his first crime novel

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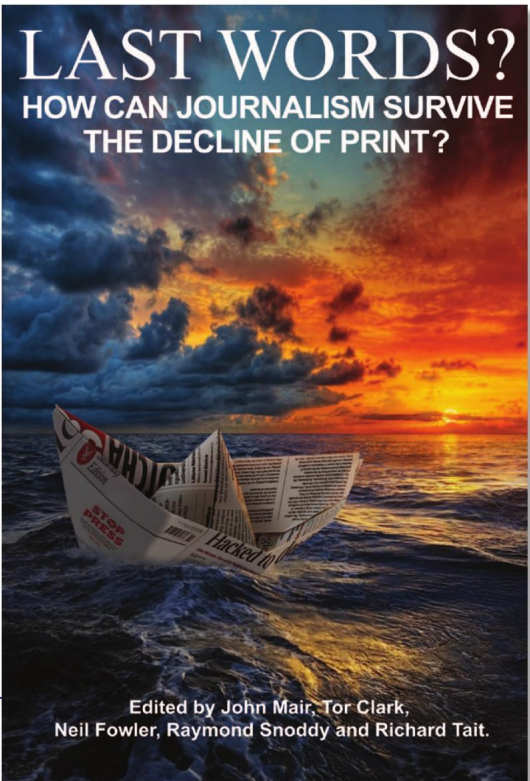
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