

Ricky Gervais, the UK's very own king of embarrassment, has cracked the US — without even losing weight, getting his teeth fixed or curbing his foul language, even when he's being interviewed. All it takes, he says, is empathy

BY CATHERINE SHOARD
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

"I lie all the time," says Ricky Gervais. "The last lie I told was the last time someone invited me to a wedding, or a christening, or a party. I can't say, 'I don't really like you that much, I'm worried about the other people you'd invite; a wedding bores me stupid, I think it's ridiculous and pointless and I'd rather sit at home in my pants drinking wine.'"

So what does he say?
"When is it? Oh, I can't do Saturday.' But they're white lies. There wouldn't be any point in telling the truth."

Gervais is getting frank about fibbing because his latest character — a misanthropic British dentist called Bertram Pincus, whom he plays in his new movie, *Ghost Town* — can't manage a tactful lie. Pincus, like Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, is a fantasy figure for those frustrated by the need to stick to good manners.

"He thinks he's got special rights to be honest," Gervais says, "when actually it doesn't get you anywhere and it hurts people. Old women have the right to say what's on their mind. My mum had rights. 'Oh Rick,' she used to say. 'You're going to get followed; you look like a right poof.'"

Looking at Gervais is unnerving, though not for the same reasons his mother was unnerved: your brain keeps tripping you up, insisting that you are, in fact, watching TV. Listening, too. The voice is David Brent, all the time: the accent, the attitudinal punctuation. Later on he says, in one go: "It doesn't annoy me that other people believe in God, but indoctrination annoys me a bit, and obviously religious fascism; it's the only thing that makes my blood boil, that and animal cruelty. The threat of violence because someone disses your God that I know doesn't exist."

All serious points, but run together like that they somehow make you feel like giggling. It's the big words in the flat tone, and the stress on "I know"; the "along with animal cruelty." It goes into your head and gets muddled up with Brent saying of Dolly Parton: "And people say she's just a big pair of tits."

Otherwise, though, just to be clear: Gervais is absolutely nothing like Brent. Nor Andy Millman from his hit BBC comedy *Extras*. Nor Pincus. All three are horrifically honest misfits who spend so much time with their feet in their mouths that only someone hypersensitive to social niceties could create them.

The seeds were sewn by a magician friend years back. "A friend used to do this card trick where, for about 10 seconds, you thought he'd really messed up, before all was revealed to be part of the act," he says. "I grew to love that 10 seconds, of people feeling sorry for him, of feeling a bit smug. And I've always tried to do that. People thinking: this is terrible, this is awful, this is uncomfortable."

Pincus is, in some ways, a step on from the psyches of Brent and Millman: he's happy with himself, for a start. He's bright, and witty, on occasion.

He doesn't live by 'The Rules,' you know



Ricky Gervais, left, portrays dentist Bertram Pincus, who is pursued by ghosts in the comedy *Ghost Town*. PHOTOS: REUTERS AND AP

"I met a lot of people — well, men — at university who were like that," says Gervais (he studied biology at University College London). "Higher logic, lower emotion. They came across as rude, but they didn't mean it. It was as if they had some sort of barrier in their social intercourse."

For Pincus, this barrier is broken after he goes into hospital for a colonoscopy, briefly expires on the operating table, then wakes to find that he can see dead people, all of whom want his help. Greg Kinnear's ghost wants him to stop his widow, Tea Leoni, marrying the wrong man. You can guess what happens. The surprise is how skillfully it's handled. This is a terrifically funny and moving film, with a weirdly dignified central performance.

Gervais is proud of it ("classy" seems to be his adjective of choice). No wonder: where other, more superficially plausible homegrown comedy stars have tried and failed to crack the US, Gervais has succeeded in spectacular fashion. Partly it is because he saved himself for the right script, rather than succumbing to "some terrible British film about trying to get a hockey team into division two." And partly it's because there's so much heft and feeling — indeed, such a prioritization of feeling over action that there isn't a single snog in the film. Also, this is turf that Gervais knows: the desperate difficulty of understanding one another, the social comedy in endless tiny glances.

"It's about a man whose life gets turned around by an external force — it's a high-concept movie; there's ghosts in it — and so he starts realizing that he's missing out on the most important thing in life, which is contact with people." You could read Pincus' transformation as a sort of limey rehabilitation: is he having his British emotional ineptitude purged, learning how to become — whisper it — American? Did Gervais recognize that as Pincus' path to redemption?

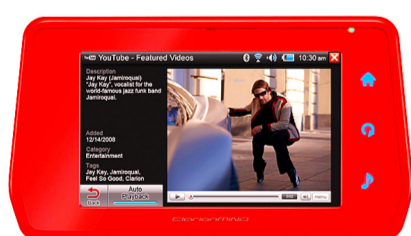
"Redemption," he says, little eyes gleaming, "is my favorite thing. As an atheist, I think forgiveness is the greatest virtue. You have to be a very harsh person to not accept someone genuinely saying sorry. That's why at the end of *Extras* we did it plainly and cleanly when he just looked down the lens and said to Maggie: 'I'm so sorry.' I think it's much stronger than forced poetry."

Redemption seems to be a watchword for Gervais. The reason it's so crucial, he thinks, is that it helps the viewer feel involved in the script. "In every good comedy or drama someone represents us. If they're redeemed, we feel we've been liberated, or saved. If it's done well, you're part of the journey. That's why everything begins or ends with empathy. If you've got that, you've got nearly anything. Everything else is the icing on the cake."

Because humans are basically self-interested? "Yes. I don't think there's any real altruism. But you want to be in a society where everyone's all right, otherwise it's not OK for you."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

[TECHNOLOGY REVIEWS]



The Clarion mini PC.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

FOR THE CAR WITH EVERYTHING, A COMPUTER OF ITS OWN

Where haven't PCs gone? They're common in dens and living rooms and are even creeping into beds and onto park benches. But until the ClarionMind from Clarion, they have never colonized the automobile.

The Clarion mini PC has an 800-megahertz Intel Atom processor and 512 megabytes of memory. It has a 5-inch touch screen and 4 gigabytes of storage for programs and media. The device can be connected to the Internet via Wi-Fi or by pairing it with a compatible cellphone over Bluetooth. The device uses a special version of Linux and includes software for Global Positioning System mapping, along with a Firefox-based browser for visiting Web sites on the go.

The Mind can play audio and offer driving directions over the car's speaker system. Video and music can be stored on a microSD card, and quick keys allow instant access to MySpace and YouTube. Clarion has not announced a price but the device should be available next month. Obviously the Clarion-Mind's more complex functions are best suited for passenger — not driver — entertainment.



H2 Audio's Surge headphones.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

ENABLING A SOUNDTRACK FOR UNDERWATER WORKOUTS

Unlike runners (who put personalized *Rocky* training-montage soundtracks on their iPods), swimmers tend to exercise in silence. But water enthusiasts who don't want to sacrifice their headsets have a new option. H2 Audio has created its fourth-generation waterproof headphones, called the Surge, which retail for US\$60.

The headsets can withstand up to 6.65m of water and come with five sets of sound-isolation earplugs to help ensure a more customized, watertight fit. The Surge's speakers have a new in-ear design that increases the bass of their third-generation counterpart. To help minimize dislodging, the cable was lengthened to 112cm, so feel free to perfect that heelside back roll.

AN IPHONE CASE THAT DOES SOLAR-POWERED DOUBLE DUTY AS A CHARGER

The Asian tech importer Brando.com.hk's latest gadget, a solar-powered iPhone case and charger, taps into two recent



Brando's iPhone case.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

and noble obsessions — going green and keeping your iPhone battery full.

The US\$48 device is made of black leather and includes a 3.7-volt rechargeable battery and a built-in photocell.

The case can fully charge an iPhone in about 12 hours in direct sunlight (enough power to make a quick call takes less time).

The case comes in two formats — a flip-top model that opens at the bottom and a book-like model with a fastener at the side. The device also includes an AC charger to initially charge the battery. The solar panel can then top off both the auxiliary battery and the iPhone's battery, when needed. It is compatible with the older iPhone as well as the iPhone 3G.

The case adds about 85g to your phone's overall weight.

Suddenly, leaving your iPhone out in the sun is not necessarily a bad idea.

DELL'S PORTABLE PROJECTOR FITS IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND

Backs and shoulders will appreciate



Dell's M109S pocket projector.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Dell's new portable projector. The computer maker's new M109S On-the-Go pocket-size projector weighs in at a vertebrae-friendly 0.36kg, and can fit in the palm of your hand.

The M109S features 858 x 600 SVGA resolution, good enough to project a decent image (think more PowerPoint, less David Lean) and a mercury-free LED light source with a four-year life expectancy.

The M109S also comes with a three-in-one multi-input cable that combines the DC power input, VGA and composite connectors, which means fewer peripherals to pack. Vertical adjustment and auto keystone features help restore tilted screens to their rectangular format. The US\$500 M109S, out now, is compatible with both US and European television standards, and is HDTV capable. Understandably, chiropractors are up in arms over this.

THIS HEADSET FOLLOWS YOU FROM WORK TO WORKOUT

Your home, neighborhood coffee shop and, on better days, the beach have all served as your mobile office. Unfortunately, not every headset can accommo-



Sennheiser's Bluetooth headset.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

date such an on-the-go lifestyle.

Sennheiser's latest Bluetooth headset, the VMX Office, works with landlines, computers and mobile phones, so you only need one device as you move from car to office to home office.

The Office's Bluetooth compatibility (1.0, 1.1 and 2.0) allows for hands-free calls up to 30.5m away and a single button lets you switch between landline and mobile devices. The VMX's VoiceMax technology reduces invasive background noise and picks up and enhances human voices, a feature that's bound to come in handy during those power business walks.

The US\$280 VMX Office, out now, also comes equipped with five hours of talk time and more than 100 standby hours. Your 3pm treadmill session/conference call awaits.

AN OVERSIZE MOUSE CAN EXTEND AND TILT FOR A BETTER FIT

Technology should fit your needs, not



Humanscale's ergonomic mouse.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

the other way around. At least that's the sentiment behind the ergonomically designed Switch Mouse, which can stretch and tilt to fit your hand.

Created by Humanscale, which makes adjustable keyboard and monitor supports, the US\$120 Switch Mouse is about 30 percent bigger than a typical mouse. The size is intended to mitigate wrist injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome by incorporating a built-in palm rest and encouraging users to move the mouse with arm motions rather than the more vulnerable wrist muscles.

The device can even be stretched using a ratchet-like internal extender to accommodate larger hands so that fingers fall properly on the mouse buttons.

Also, in an attempt to prevent repetitive stress injury, the underside of the Switch Mouse has a V-shaped bracket that tilts the pointer at a 45-degree angle to keep one's wrist as straight as possible and minimize pronation. Better still, the bracket can be set for left- or right-handed users.

Just don't expect it to feel natural the first time you use it. Discouraging bad but ingrained mouse habits can take some time.

— NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE