

Russell Brand stalks into a Manhattan hotel room, sharp-elbowed, bent-kneed, staring wildly through the windows of the 37th floor. He sounds — “Going for the hip-hop look?” — like someone’s sarcastic older brother. I glance down. Above the waistband of my jeans something has, indeed, gone horribly awry. “Two inches of visible pants!” Brand looks delighted. “But aren’t you nice and slim! You don’t look like a person who’s — I mean, you’re not tortured by that, are you? It’s not like you starve yourself?”

Er, no.
“Nice work.”

Here it is, Brand’s stock in trade, the casual delivery of absurd or obnoxious statements, and it gets excellent results. The 35-year-old has enormous faith in his power to win over people, which is just as well, since he spent most of his 20s aggravating, in minor but persistent ways, the police, his employers and every woman he ever dated. Quite how a former heroin addict who kept keys to an ex-girlfriend’s flat so he could let himself in to steal from her — who in public at least always talks in italics — can come off as guileless is a mystery, but he does.

You wonder what he is like in the off hours.

Today, however, he is very much on, promoting *Get Him to the Greek*, a sequel to the 2008 hit *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* in which he played laconic British rock star Aldous Snow. Produced by Judd Apatow and co-starring Sean “P Diddy” Combs and Jonah Hill, the film is so full of Brandisms — those long strings of mock-serious locutions — that he might have asked for a writing credit. No, he says, “Given the opportunities these people have afforded me and the platform they’ve given me, that would be rather unchivalrous.” Brand can afford to be generous. Engaged to pop star Katy Perry, free of his addictions and with several more Hollywood films in the pipeline, there’s a sense of him teetering on the edge of the really big time, although what the Americans see when they look at Brand is hard to work out. Actually, he says, it isn’t. “Americans: what are their assumptions about people from the UK? Probably they’re informed by *Monty Python*, rock ‘n’ roll and Victorian England. If you have those things about your character, they’ll go, all right, I know what this is.” He dips his head and gives me the look that says, how can you resist someone as quiveringly self-aware, as attuned to the mechanisms of his own irresistibility, as I, Russell Brand, am?

Of course, in among the comic verbosity and finely tuned bathos, Brand talks a lot of shit. In lesser hands what he does would be pretentious student comedy. When he was a presenter on MTV, he tried to break through the wall of meaningless white noise by coming in on cue with total absurdities. “Derrida! Kettle-Russell!” he would say in lieu of “welcome back after the break.” Or “Baudelaire! Pipe-cleaner Russell!” (“I’d try,” he explains, “to say one thing that was cerebral and one thing that was just stupid.”)

As a child, he observed among his peers a group he characterized as “nan-kids” — children brought up wholly or in part by grandparents with vocab idiosyncrasies from two generations above, and has taken inspiration from their linguistic style. “Twit,” he says, and “balderdash” and “nincompoop.” His memoir, *My Booky Wook* — the title comes from *A Clockwork Orange* and has the same disruptive effect as trashing the MTV script — is a combination of fine comic shtick (in the US edition, he explains to American readers that what is known in England as a waltzer is a “tilt-a-whirl” in the US, which sounds “like a nonconsensual, diagonal sex attack”) and straightforwardly good writing: Oxford Street with its “perpetual glum buzz”; his father’s “cheap charisma.”

The most irksome part of his act is the baby talk, used to flatter and throw into relief all that intellect, and there is a question of how much the comedy plays on snobbish reactions to a guy with long hair and Essex vowels name-dropping philosophers.

Brand is a partial nan-kid. His mother suffered recurring bouts of cancer when he was growing up and he was farmed out to relatives in Essex, the grandmother he loved and the grandmother he didn’t, and his absent father, who was half-useless, half-inspiring. “My dad is from an estate in Dagenham, but wholeheartedly believes you can do what you want if you work hard enough. If you refuse to give up. So I got that. That message was loud for me.”

When Brand’s father was flush, he was sent to private school, then the cash ran out and he went back to a normal state school. The most useful part of his education, he says, came from obsessively watching TV comedies. He has huge bits of script still by memory: “I do have a regard for the musicality of language that came from BBC sitcoms like *Fawlty Towers*. ‘Your glasses are there, Mrs Richards! You can see the sea, it’s there between the land and the sky — you’d need a telescope to see that — well, then may I suggest that you move to a hotel closer to the sea, or preferably in it!’”

It was his role as Fat Sam in a student production of *Bugsy Malone* that convinced him to apply to Italia Conti, that “famous school for unbearable brats” as he calls it, from which he was later expelled for drug use. His mother was always being called to the school for one crime or another, so that, he writes, “even now when I do something wrong — if I say something inappropriate on a live TV show, for example — I half expect to have to deliver a note to Barbara Brand: ‘Please come up to Channel 4 head office, Russell’s done something despicable.’”

Brand conveys all this with the talent he has for putting himself outside his own experience, as if he is, to some extent, an innocent bystander to his own histrionics. From the beginning he cultivated a style based on the idea he would one day be famous — that these would be stories to enliven a memoir. “I don’t know if this is the kind of retrospective analysis that people are fond of applying to their work or actions, but it feels like I knew I was going to be famous and I knew that an element of that would be traumatic, so that if I could make myself something big and

‘Charming’ is his second name

*He’s the UK’s arch seducer who is settling down;
the BBC renegade who is hot property in Hollywood.
Everyone loves Russell Brand —
but not half as much as he loves himself*

BY EMMA BROCKES
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



PHOTO: REUTERS

otherworldly, it would be a kind of defense. That I would have a degree of safety.”

When Brand was 17, his father took him on a sex tourism holiday to the Far East — unorthodox parenting that was, he says, actually quite helpful. If there are roots to his bad behavior, particularly the incontinent sexuality that would see him checking into a sex-addiction clinic in the US, it was something that happened a decade earlier. He was sent to a tutor who, he writes in the memoir, “when I got a question right” abused him. He told his mum, who told his dad, who said “he’d deal with it. But he never did anything.”

Now, says Brand, “People advised me to take that part out. The reason I left it in was because I thought, if in chapter four you see this happen, when in chapter 12 I’m rampaging round having it off with prostitutes, you might see a corollary. It might be less unsavory. That was my hope.”

At some point, while he’s off on one of his soliloquies, I go momentarily offline and stare out of the window at rainy New York. Brand notices instantly and for the next few seconds leans urgently forward, punctuates everything he says with pats to my knee and uses my name a lot, until I have clicked back in. It’s not aggressive or sexual, but the highly tuned, professional insecurity that drives successful performers.

His honesty is of course winning, and his self-deprecation — he describes himself as a “right asshole” and his early life as “a trivial Greek tragedy” — one of his key appeals, although it doesn’t exculpate him quite as much as he thinks it does. Fairness is important to Brand. He has just delivered the second volume of memoir (it is currently with the lawyers, he says heavily), in which he had to tread even more carefully because so many of the people in it are famous.

Brand’s ambition is the strongest force within him. It’s what got him, ultimately, to quit drugs, although he is still charmed by his memories of the bad years. “I hear stories from people who remember better than I do how I was, and I sometimes think, ‘Wow, this guy sounds amazing.’ A pirate! A wild man! Romping around with no shirt on, drinking tequila from the bottle, causing chaos, cutting myself up! It adheres quite well to the clichés one hears of rock ‘n’ roll characters and self-destructive poets.”

Still, everything subordinates to his desire to get ahead, which comes, he says, partly from his dad, partly from some innate part of him and partly from growing up under then prime minister Margaret Thatcher, when families such as his were encouraged to buy their council houses, climb up the ladder and “be selfish!” Is a small part of him grateful to Thatcher?

“No.” He laughs. “Not one bit. I have no gratitude to Thatcher, nor to Cameron, neither. I’ve never voted, never will.”

Brand is involved with David Lynch’s foundation, which seeks to introduce transcendental meditation techniques into schools and refers to things like the “ocean of consciousness.” Does he have a mantra?

“Everyone has their own mantra. They give it to you and you can’t tell anyone what it is, ever.”

Did he see that episode of *Carb Your Enthusiasm* when someone stole Larry’s mantra?

He looks fleetingly unamused. “I guess they perverted it for reasons of comedy.” Abruptly he smiles. “I liked that episode a lot.”

How does it work?

“You close your eyes and you think the mantra, think the mantra, your mind tries to drag you off, you go back to the mantra. You’re right: anything that is pompous or serious invites ridicule. But this, to me, doesn’t. Because apart from anything else, Lynch is fucking funny. Funny. I mean, obviously I’m aware of that drug addict recovery cliché. But this stuff is working for me. I’m into yoga, I meditate all the time, I’m vegetarian. The most serious thing in my life, I suppose, is my recovery.”

And Katy Perry, with whom he is in the first monogamous relationship of his life. They got engaged at New Year. “It’s lovely, actually. What I most enjoy is knowing that I’m trying my hardest, I’m really trying my best. It’s rewarding for me to know that. There’s no lying or tricking; it’s a nice feeling.”

Why doesn’t he want to cheat on her, like he did on all the others?

“She’s funny. She’s really — I think what it is — and I don’t want to rinse away the romance with some incredibly acute analysis, and I’m probably too befuddled and cockeyed with it all to even offer that — but: I’m quite able, I think, to seduce people. So usually I’d be like, right then, oh good, that person seems to be spellbound, I can get on with the rest of my day. But with her — I mean I love her, in a really pure way — she’s a beautiful person, funny and gentle and sweet. But she’s so demanding! You know that program *I Love Lucy*? It’s like that round my house. A lot of the time it’s mental. Proper handful. It’s very diverting. That woman can put on several voices that mean I have to stop what I’m doing.”

At this stage Brand turns things down and plays into the idea he has of himself as highly ethical. “I was offered loads of money for an advert recently, I really nearly done it, came so close. Then I thought, I ain’t doing it. I sort of think it would be good, wouldn’t it, to steer a straight path through this. The thing that’s a little bit frightening, Emma, is to garner some kind of actual authority; this is why I’m not having any part of it and I’m giving it all back, like Buddha. Aaarrrgh.”

Finishing the second volume of his memoir has made him consider his life and the anticlimax of having got what he wanted. He is honest about this in a way celebrities rarely are, lest it sound like whining. Of fame, he says, “It’s peculiar and confusing and surprisingly unsatisfying.” The prospect of success in the US thrills and dismays him. “I don’t want to get all Jean Genet, but the people around me are from Essex, not LA. I still feel an affinity with these people. I’m not suggesting that Essex is some kind of Steinbeckian doss house. But it almost is.”

There is only so much satisfaction Brand can get out of things. “In the words of Morrissey,” he says, “I was bored before I even began.”

Get Him to the Greek is out on 25 June.