

Life's a DRAMA!

James Dreyfus burst onto our screens in Ab Fab and has rarely been off it since. With roles on stage, TV and in Hollywood, he has become one of our most diverse actors. And, as he tells Rob Edwards, he has had a tremendous amount of fun and excitement along the way



James Dreyfus with co-star Rebecca Johnson

Rehearsals for Noel Coward's *The Vortex* are a day ahead of schedule at Kingston's *Rose Theatre*, and actor James Dreyfus is buzzing.

While slightly disconcerted by the projection of his face looming large on the theatre bar windows behind me, Dreyfus

nonetheless waxes lyrical about the star-studded production, which runs throughout February. It was Coward's first commercial success, staged in 1924, and deals with the weighty themes of jealousy, sexuality and drug addiction in bourgeois high society.

"I think when you leave the show at

the end, you'll be quite gobsmacked," he says, gesticulating.

"It all ends up with a rewriting of the closet scene from *Hamlet*, between the mother and the son.

"It's a very incestuous type of relationship. They're jealous of each other, they love each other, they hate each other. Then, of course, on top of that he's addicted to cocaine.

"It all turns into a dramatic mess – a vortex. It's a very appropriate title! It really is one of his more shocking plays."

The Chiswick resident, who spent his early years in and around Putney, first won recognition after appearances in BBC sitcoms *Absolutely Fabulous* and *The Thin Blue Line*.

He later starred with comedienne Kathy Burke in the notoriously naughty *Gimme Gimme Gimme* and Bette Midler's short-lived CBS sitcom, *Bette*.

Now in rehearsal week two, the 44-year-old is embracing his early love of theatre and enjoying *The Rose*.

"So far, what I've met of the staff and everything, it's an absolutely lovely place," he says. "Constantly filled with kids! It's been like a leisure centre here today, without the smell of chlorine!"

Dreyfus moved to Devon at the age of two after his parents' divorce, later settling in London aged ten, where he and his brother attended Harrow. It was here he met friend and fellow actor Robert Portal (*Marilyn*, *The Iron Lady*).

"Bert is one of my oldest, best friends," he says warmly. "We were always teamed up together. When we did *Hamlet*, I was Hamlet, he was Claudius. When we did the full eight-hour *Nicholas Nickleby*, he was Nicholas, I was Smike. Every single play we did, we were in it together."

Heart set on the performing arts, Dreyfus yearned to trade in his Harrow straw boater for the thespian's fedora.

"I didn't last the full five years at Harrow," he grins. "I only stayed four. The headmaster and I didn't quite see eye-to-eye. Some loved the whole authoritarian thing, but I sort of rebelled."

His love of fun did not diminish as he embarked on adulthood.



After a short stint at college in Holborn, Dreyfus enrolled at the *Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts*. There he trained under the guidance of method actor, Doreen Cannon, whose distinguished alumni include Pierce Brosnan and Colin Firth.

"I had a wonderful time at RADA," he reminisces. "I think we were known as the very naughty year!"

"I remember a lot of drinking. A lot of carousing. I've got really fond memories."

Following notable debut performances in *Lady in the Dark* and *Julius Caesar*, it wasn't long before primetime sitcom producers took notice.

"It all started when I did *Absolutely Fabulous*," he explains.

"I was so excited. It was beyond belief. It was my favourite programme on television. To be in the same room as Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley was amazing."

Right from day one Dreyfus was thrown in at the deep end.

"On the first day of filming they came up to me and said: 'By the way, do you drive?' I said no, I don't. So they gave me a quick lesson, and I had to drive this mini.

"I had Joanna Lumley, Jennifer Saunders and June Whitfield in the back. And I remember Joanna Lumley's legs coming over my head. And she's going: 'Drive, sweetie, drive!' And I've just learned!

"I'm thinking, if I crash this car now, the cream of British comedy are in the back – I'm going to be killed for this!"

Slipping into a higher gear, Dreyfus was offered a part in Ben Elton's *The Thin Blue Line* as the puerile PC Goody.

"I grew up worshipping Rowan Atkinson. It was incredibly exciting to work with him. It was sad we only did two series, but I still had a fantastic time doing it, although the character was slightly misunderstood."

Dreyfus, an openly gay actor with an aptitude for camp, endearing characters, has long wrangled with his 'pink press' critics.

"I saw Goody more like Frank Spencer from *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*. I thought of him as naïve and silly, and gormless and stupid. But most people focused on the fact they thought he was gay.

"You never question Frank Spencer being gay, because he was married in the show. But you couldn't get camper than that!

"Goody is obviously not gay. The whole point is he's in love with Maggie Habbib. He's just an idiot who moves around a lot."

Dreyfus shakes his head in agitation.

"It got compounded when I played Tom in *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme*."



The full cast of *The Vortex*

"If Tom was a straight character, I'd have played him in exactly the same way. He behaved like that because he was an actor. And a bad actor. Not because he was gay. This has sort of followed me for a while."

As a result of his flamboyant television roles, the spectre of typecasting has haunted Dreyfus.

"I'm sure I have become typecast. But you can't take those parts in comedy, those over-the-top parts, and then say don't typecast me. It's going to happen. So now I'm hoping enough time has passed. It's certainly taken a

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good eight years."

On the big screen, Dreyfus played hapless shop assistant, Martin, in the award winning *Notting Hill*, starring Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts.

"He was absolutely delightful," says Dreyfus of co-star Grant.

"He was just charming. I actually spent most of my time sitting in his trailer with him, yacking away."

The film captured the notice of 'The Divine Miss M', Bette Midler, who invited Dreyfus to co-star in her ill-fated sitcom, *Bette*. Riding high on the success of *Gimme Gimme Gimme*, Dreyfus jetted to Los Angeles for the audition.

"I went over there and hired this ridiculously, stupidly big house in

the Hollywood Hills with a pool, opposite David Hockney and next to Balthazar Getty.

"I spent all my money and I think I had the best two years of my whole life!" he laughs shamelessly.

"I came back flat broke. But I thought I'll never have an experience like that again, so I really enjoyed it while it lasted!"

After 18 episodes the show was cancelled – the result of tumbling ratings and the genre's already swamped market.

"I knew it wouldn't go on forever. I got that feeling quite early on, because doing the show was quite stressful. They had a team of 20 writers and things weren't going smoothly."

Humbled, Dreyfus returned to the UK to complete the third and final series of *Gimme Gimme Gimme* and hasn't stopped working since, with stage roles and TV parts as diverse as comedy *My Hero* to gritty dramas like *Whitechapel*.

With a role in the next series of Sky Living comedy *Mount Pleasant* on the horizon, what is Dreyfus most proud of to date?

"I'm very proud of *Gimme Gimme Gimme*, actually. I loved doing that. And in their own way, *Notting Hill* and *Thin Blue Line*. But I think it's probably the things I'm not well known for, particularly on stage, that I'm proudest of."

■ See James Dreyfus in *The Vortex* at the Rose Theatre Kingston, Feb 7 – Mar 9. Tickets: rosetheatrekingston.org

