



BEING FUNNY IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

Comedy duo Armstrong and Miller tell **Laura Kelly** that falling out with each other was an inspired career move... and that raising a laugh is hard work in 'Puritanical' Britain

There's a very simple reason why most comedy sketch shows fall flat. According to Alexander Armstrong and Ben Miller, it's all down to whether or not you're willing to put in the work. With a second series of their BBC One take on the most tricky of TV genres about to hit screens, and a third series already commissioned, they agree that it's their work ethic that makes *The Armstrong and Miller Show* succeed.

"If you're going to do a sketch show, there's no point unless you're going to roll up your sleeves and get stuck in," says Armstrong. "That means being there every single day from the day you start writing, all the way through. It's a seven-month job and you have to make sure you're there or it's not your show."

"It's such a labour of love," agrees Miller. "It is a really, really difficult thing to do because you're relying on so many things that have to come together. Part of what helps is having done it for a very, very long time – you get a feel for what will work. But still, you shoot some things and look at it and you think, 'God, it's as if we intended it not to be funny'. Sketch comedy is a black art, it's a kind of alchemy."

SINCE THEIR FIRST sketch show on Paramount Comedy channel, in 1997, Armstrong and Miller have produced a slew of comedy gold characters. From the naked vets of spoof fly-on-the-wall documentary *Nude Practice*, to the inspirational teacher who becomes immediately surly and disinterested once the school bell rings, and the WWII chav pilots, who speak in clipped, upper-crust accents but use Noughties street slang, their graft has turned base materials into shining skits.

The chav pilots, much beloved of YouTube, will fly again in series two but they are set to be joined by several new characters. There will be an Ulsterman royal correspondent who "gorges on" the minutiae of the lives of the nobility; Jilted Jack, whose wife ran off with the wedding DJ but has gone on the honeymoon anyway, and *The White Devil*, a self-important ex-pat in Africa.

Armstrong and Miller are both excited about Dennis Lincoln-Park – an art historian, played by Miller, who presents a programme in the style of Lord Clark's *Civilisation* but can't help destroying every priceless artefact he goes near.

The sketch show may be hard work but there's a glee in their voices – Miller describes it as "the most fun you can have", while Armstrong says it's his "favourite thing" – when they talk about working together on the show that makes you wonder why there was a seven-year gap between the end of the first incarnation on Channel 4 and teaming up again for the BBC series.

In the past, the excuse has been that, while they were asked, they didn't think they had enough new material to pull it off. Now, Armstrong admits that having worked together since they met at Cambridge University in 1992,

where they were both in Footlights – the theatre group that spawned several generations of British comedy heavyweights from Peter Cook and Eric Idle through Fry and Laurie to Mitchell and Webb – they became sick of the sight of each other.

"We've had some fantastic fights," Armstrong confesses. "When we were on Channel 4, between 1996 and 2000 we did four series and they were fantastic fun but we were much more insular in those days. We felt we were going to be joined at the hip for the rest of time and that created an awful lot of pressure. At the end of that stage we did have a bit of a falling out. We didn't work



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together again for about five years."

As with many close relationships, though, taking a break forced them to realise how much they meant to each other, and Armstrong says: "When we did come back to Armstrong and Miller it meant that we could do it because we loved it and not because we were clinging to the wreckage."

The time out also allowed them both to build independent careers. Armstrong has become a semi-regular presenter on *Have I Got News For You* as well as appearing in Steve Coogan's *Saxondale* as a Jeremy Clarkson-style television motoring presenter, playing David Cameron in the satirical fictional documentary *The Trial of Tony Blair* and appearing in a (pretty funny) series of adverts for Pimms. He was even offered the job of presenting *Countdown*, though he turned it down, since he didn't want to be pigeonholed as a presenter.

Miller, meanwhile, has starred in ITV's kids drama *Primeval* and satirical show *Moving Wallpaper*, played Rowan Atkinson's sidekick in the movie *Johnny English* and reminded people that he is

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IT'S THE CHAV PILOTS, INNIT (LEFT), AND MILLER WON THE PLUM ROLE IN *MOVING WALLPAPER* (ABOVE)

not actually Rob Brydon by appearing with his Welsh doppelganger on panel show *QI*. Not to be outdone on the advertising front, he is also the voice of the PG Tips monkey in the series of ads starring Johnny Vegas.

Perhaps inevitably, there have been occasions when they've both been chasing the same role – and they admit to a few jealousies. For Miller, the biggest one is Armstrong's recent turn as Clive Sinclair in the BBC's fantastic dramatisation of the early rivalries in the UK computer industry, *Micro Men*. "I'm just mad about physics and electronics and that stuff," says Miller, who studied for a (yet to be completed) PhD in physics. "So I'm so jealous of him getting to play Clive Sinclair."

Armstrong, on the other hand, "really badly wanted" the role that Miller played in *Moving Wallpaper*, although he admits his buddy did a brilliant job as TV producer Jonathan Pope in Tony Jordan's series. Professional rivalries and disagreements aside, however, the pair say that they've always remained friends off-screen.

"We always went skiing," Armstrong says, only half joking. Both with young families at home, their socialising primarily revolves around the kids – except for the raucous nights round at fellow comedian Peter Serafinowicz's house.

"Peter has Guitar Hero and we do it all the time when we go round his place," explains Miller, adding that the cream of British comedy – including Graham Linehan, Steve Merchant, Wendy Watson, Sarah Alexander and Paul Putner – often piles in to play 'Living On A Prayer'.

"I absolutely love it. I take it far too seriously and hopelessly, like some middle-aged man, pretending I'm Jeff Beck with this tiny little plastic guitar. It's so pathetic, but BRILLIANT fun," says Miller.

THEY BOTH TAKE the business of having a laugh very, very seriously and are passionate about protecting comedy from "the strictures of the Puritans". In the wake of Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand's knuckle-wrapping over Sachsgate, this mission is more important than ever, they insist. Although the duo agreed to remove a sketch from their new series that referred to "gypsies" after the BBC argued it could be seen as racist, both feel that it is wrong that offending people has become "a hanging offence".

"For me, it's really a free speech question," Miller says. "I think we have to be careful about this temptation to find things offensive. Or to think that simply because you find something offensive, that it shouldn't be allowed to exist. The issues at stake are very important for our society."

"We mustn't forget what comedy is actually for. Comedy is there to defuse issues that we find difficult to deal with."

"It is a tricky time to be writing comedy because we all have to make sure that we are not bludgeoned over the head with a current Puritanical fad," Armstrong agrees.

"Comedy is one of the few home-grown industries that we still have. Everything else has been sent out to India or China, but comedy we still make. We have a proud tradition of great comedy and we should meddle with that at our peril."

If the justification sounds a bit worthy, thankfully the fruits of their labour are anything but. The only way to defeat the humourless, after all, is to make them laugh. ●

The Armstrong and Miller Show is on *Fridays* at 9.30pm on BBC One

