

TV's golden comic duo on *Peep Show*, friendship and becoming unlikely sex symbols

THAT MITCHELL & WEBB INTERVIEW

David Mitchell, 35, and Robert Webb, 36, are the UK's busiest double act. They are the stars of Channel 4's acclaimed sitcom *Peep Show*, which returns next month, BBC sketch show *That Mitchell and Webb Look* and numerous panel games and adverts. The pair, who met through the Cambridge University Footlights, have also moved into the world of

publishing with new tome *This Mitchell and Webb Book*.
BY BRUCE DESSAU

Reader's Digest meets the well-spoken duo—often described as the new Fry and Laurie—in Robert's north London basement flat. Disappointingly, it is nothing like the one his *Peep Show* character, failed musician Jeremy, shares with Mitchell's uptight middle-manager Mark. It is neat, tidy and the walls are lined with alphabetised books and DVDs. A wedding photo of Webb with his wife Abigail Burdess is on one side of the mantelpiece. A photo of Webb with Mitchell, who's single, is on the other.

Both men are friendly, funny and open. If Mitchell is more talkative that may be because Webb is on tea-making duties.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BARRY MARSDEN



Reader's Digest: Your book is reminiscent of the Monty Python books, with accurate spoofs and advertising send-ups. I particularly enjoyed your rejected poster for the film *Titanic*, with the strapline "She's OK but the bloke drowns". What are your favourites?

David Mitchell: There's a section on newspaper headline puns. I got the idea from a newspaper that ran "Super Cally Go Ballistic, Celtic Are Atrocious", when Caledonian Thistle beat Celtic. We came up with things like "Teng Reen Bottles"—the headline for a fictional Chinese athlete

I don't think it would be consistent with being a nice person. Though if people watch us because they fancy us, that's fine. Fundamentally, I just want viewers.

RW: There was a slight spike in recognition when I won the *Comic Relief Let's Dance* competition, but I was wearing a wig and leotard so it didn't make that much difference. Somebody once recognised me while I was sitting here having my tea, so I grew that bush in front of the window.

RD: *Peep Show* is a bigger critical hit than *That Mitchell and Webb Look*.



called Teng Reen who loses his nerve during a sporting event.

Robert Webb: I like our made-up autobiography with pictures of David working as a waiter at the Yalta Conference. We didn't want the book to be just scripts; you can get the programmes on DVD so we wanted something all-new.

RD: A TV critic recently called you sex symbols. How does that feel?

DM: I don't know what it feels like, but

Do they have different audiences?

RW: Slightly. The audience of the sketch show listened to the original Radio 4 version while *Peep Show* is essentially a young man's programme watched by some others too. I'm glad that the BBC show isn't trendy. If you're trendy in TV you're going to last about as long as Bros.

DM: In our heart of hearts we wish the sketch show had had the best reviews because we don't write *Peep Show*, but people really care about

sitcoms. Audiences become very loyal...

RW: With sketch shows a lot of the work is discarding the sketches that don't work.

DM: We are in a good place and our priority is to defend it!

RD: You've been a double act for more than ten years. You're clearly very good friends.

RW: Yes. David was the best man at my wedding in 2006. Because we spend so much time working together we don't really socialise, but we have the same mates so we might end up in the same pub.

RD: Robert, Abigail is a comedian and has occasionally worked with you. Is she the Yoko Ono in the relationship?

RW: She wouldn't enjoy that idea. [At this point Abigail coincidentally walks into the lounge, prompting laughter all round. Like Webb, she has brilliant comic timing].

RD: You are currently filming the sixth series of *Peep Show*, which makes it one of the longest-running sitcoms since *Last of the Summer Wine*. Why has it been such a success?

DM: Channel 4 originally wanted a comedy with us commenting on things we were watching on TV, but it was hard to get permission for the clips so it became a conventional sitcom, which is what we wanted to start with. Flatshare comedies seem to work; *Rising Damp* and *Men Behaving Badly* were sorts of flatshares.

RW: I think it's because it's become more of a slice of life. The plots are more daring, but what people like are events: Mark getting married; pregnancy; death. The new series is very dramatic.

RD: Mark and Jeremy are perennial losers. Any changes this time round?

RW: The writers Sam Bain and Jesse Armstrong say that they chase their characters up a tree, then throw rocks at them and I think they'll keep doing that for as long as *Peep Show* is on.

RD: Are you afraid of milking the format for too long?

DM: Most people who have done good sitcoms have wanted to stop earlier than us and I don't know why; it's harder to get a well-functioning sitcom going than it is to keep it going. You shouldn't milk it dry, but you are so lucky that you owe it to yourself to get as much out of it as you can.

RW: If we did milk it, it would be high-quality milk. I think Ricky Gervais was probably wrong to do only two series of *The Office*.

RD: In those famous Apple ads, David played a PC and Robert a Mac. Will Robert always be the cool one and does David mind?

DM: I think that's a fair reflection of our personalities so we have to live with it.

RW: Sam and Jesse saw those qualities in us and wrote them into our *Peep Show* parts. It's a useful way to delineate us. We aren't physically massively different, so you've got to have a system.

'If you're trendy in TV you'll last about as long as Bros'

RD: Although, ironically, in *Peep Show* your living arrangements are the opposite of real life. Robert is not a lodger and has a pleasant home, while David still lives in a fairly grotty flat.

DM: I've not had the time to look for anywhere else. I can wait for things to bottom out! We did sort of live together like Mark and Jeremy at one point, though. Robert was going out with my flatmate so was always round. And he wasn't even paying rent. The worst possible scenario.

RD: There are no financial woes now though.

DM: There's a fair amount in the bank but not enough for the rest of my life. I prefer to expect the worst and you won't be disappointed. I'm currently living within my means. You don't want to blow it all on wild parties and then have nothing left.

RD: Do you think comedy is healthy currently?

DM: Yes. We like *The Thick of It* and I'm hooked on *Just a Minute*. But I wonder if executives would get things

right more often if they just spun a bottle. The underlying problem with comedy is that it is expensive, the press comes down hard when it doesn't work and it doesn't get the ratings of even cookery shows. Yet people look to TV for comedy more than anything else. When you lose the aspiration to come up with a new *Only Fools and Horses* or *The Office* I think you're dead at heart as a broadcaster.

RD: You've both appeared on panel games but David has done more than Robert. Why?

RW: I get asked less often, I say yes less often and I enjoy it less than David, who does it brilliantly. Why would I put my polystyrene tanks on his metal lawn? And I don't mind the idea of working a bit less hard.

This Mitchell & Webb Book is published by Fourth Estate on September 3. For a free download of Mitchell and Webb's Live 2006 show, go to audible.co.uk/readersdigest.

CAUGHT OFFSIDE

My main problem with rugby is, why is the ball pointy? Why make it random? "It's gonna bounce, it's gonna bounce... oh it's gone mad!" It's just like a very muscular form of crazy golf.

Dara Ó Briain



Jack Handey

To me, boxing is like a ballet, except there's no choreography, no music and the dancers hit each other.

Jeff Stelling revealed that Sir Alex Ferguson's a *Countdown* fan. But Fergie's not interested in the words or numbers. He just sits there with a stopwatch, shouting, "That was never 30 seconds!"

Football pundit Tom Watt