

LONDON-BASED ACTOR CHRIS DINGLI CHATS TO VERONICA STIVALA ABOUT BEING FUNNY, DIRECTING A CIRCUS, PLAYING A GETAWAY DRIVER WHO HAS TO GET RID OF ACCOMPLICES - AND HIS ANNUAL RETURN TO THE MALTESE STAGE ►

Photography: Joanna Demarco



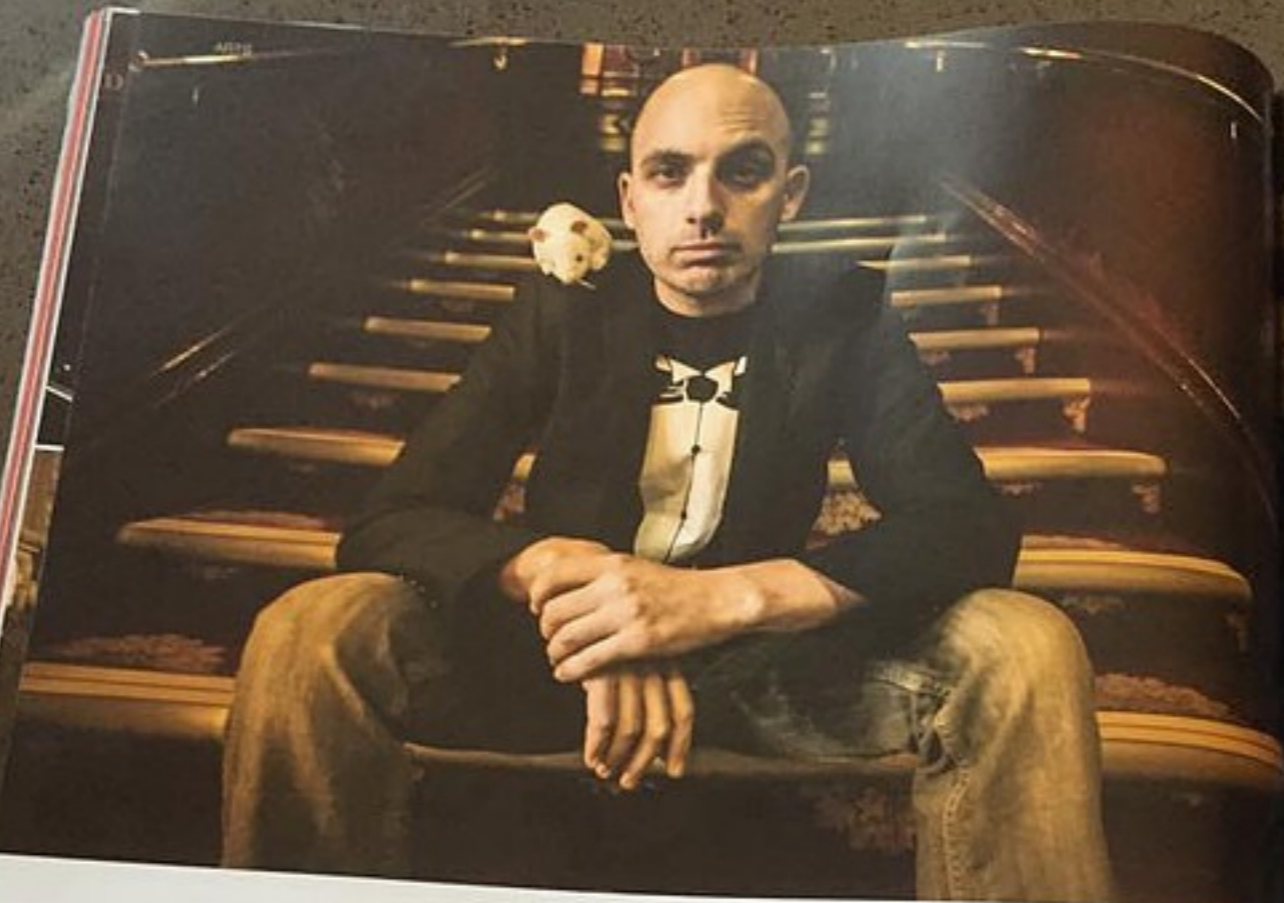
**T**his may sound odd, but being cold-hearted and analytical is the key to being funny for Chris Dingli. Of course, this does not mean that Chris is evil, quite the contrary in fact. Rather, he is ruthlessly critical of his own work. He videos his shows and then cuts anything that does not get a laugh, no matter how much he might personally love that joke or skit. "Write 10 jokes and only perform the best two," he says. "Throw away the rest or refine them until they're funnier than the top two and then replace them. That's the only way to be consistently funny. That, or be Jim Carey."

Actor and writer Chris Dingli is well-known on the local theatre scene, even though he is now based in London, where he works full-time as an actor. His star performances have included the lead role in *Masquerade's* production of *Amadeus*, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Clockhouse Theatre Company), Iago in *Othello* (Icarus Theatre Co & Original Theatre Co), Rick in *Emma Thompson Presents Fair Trade* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Alonso in *The Tempest* (GB Theatre Company UK Tour) and, most recently this year, Bernie Bernbaum in *Secret Cinema 21: Miller's Crossing*.

In addition to theatre, Chris also does television and film acting – and even circus work. He recently shot an advert for the BBC iPlayer and is currently shooting on long-running BBC drama *Doctors*. Last month, he spent some time directing a circus show called *Meet the Hogwallops* with LIT Circus. It will be playing in Rome over Christmas and the New Year. "I'd love to join them there," he admits, but he will be performing in Malta on the same dates – of which, more later.

In January he will be shooting a feature film called *The Return* in which he plays a getaway driver who must find and get rid of some former accomplices to save his own skin. He will also be shooting a short comedy he wrote called *The Seat*. ►

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**“If people are laughing, you’re doing something right. If they’re laughing constantly, then your show is a success”**

But before that, Chris has his Malta comedy show this month. Described as a Christmas comedy cavalcade, *The Comedy Knights* is essentially a show made up of a number of comedy sketches by a number of well-known names on the local theatre and stand-up comedy scene. The show is now in its second edition, but Christmas comedy shows are nothing new to Chris, who had previously performed the also successful *Dingle Bells*, *Malcolm Smells*, together with Malcolm Galea. Now, hot on the heels of last year’s highly successful, sold-out showing of *The Comedy Knights*, Chris and his creative team have come up with a new show for this year.

So what does Chris, who has written many of the sketches, think has made the show

so successful? “When performing comedy, it’s really easy to know if you’re being successful or not. If people are laughing, you’re doing something right. If they’re laughing constantly, then your show is a success,” he says.

Last year’s audience particularly loved the political sketches and songs, such as Simon Busuttill singing Gaia’s *The Start*, with possibly the biggest hit being a song about two PN supporters from Sliema who voted for Labour in the last election and are now denying having done so. Chris particularly enjoyed Pia Zammit and Jo Caruana’s performances in a sketch called *The VVIP Crowd* about two well-to-do women gossiping on the school round. ▶



**"The trick is to make it seem spontaneous but in reality, it's mostly very strictly scripted"**

One of his favourite skits was *The World's Shortest Panto*, which is pretty much what it says on the tin. The team looked up the world record for the shortest pantomime and then performed one that was shorter. As a grand finale, they then smashed that record and performed a panto in 18 seconds. "That really brought the house down," muses Chris.

Speaking about the creative process for the show, Chris notes how there is a different creative process for writing and for performing, both of which he finds equally enjoyable. "When creating the show, the writers (myself included) all pitch ideas for sketches and songs that they'd like to write. That gives us a good overview of what is potentially available and then we assign sketches to different writers, based on their pitches or on ideas we think they can develop," he explains.

Unlike some of their previous shows, in which improvisation played a major role, this particular show doesn't allow as much room for improvisation as one might think. Improvisation is encouraged in rehearsal, but once performances begin, it becomes more about precision. "This kind of comedy is about timing and meticulousness," says Chris. "The jokes are not simply written but constructed, and any word spoken out of order, or any inflection missed, can ruin the entire set-up or scene. I'm not

saying it's better than improv, it's just a different kind of show. The trick is to make it seem spontaneous but in reality, it's mostly very strictly scripted."

The show is all about poking fun at the year that has been, and this year we can look forward to a good mixture of songs and sketches, each packed to the brim with laughs that come at the expense of local politicians, companies and personalities. That said, some of the feedback from last year's show was that people who weren't familiar with the Maltese socio-political landscape still enjoyed the show and found it very funny. "I found that to be a huge compliment," notes Chris.

In addition to Chris's jam-packed schedule, he has recently become a father, which he says is pretty much the entirety of his life at home right now. "Between staying up nights with the baby and work there's not much room left for anything else at the moment," he comments. When wants to clear his head, he usually goes for a walk down by the river in London, but as he points out, for a performer the job never stops: "If you're not in work, then you're either looking for work or creating your own, or both." **Q**

*The Comedy Knights plays at the Salesian Theatre in Sliema from 26 December to 3 January. For more information visit [www.comedyknights.com](http://www.comedyknights.com)*