



MARK STEEL IS NOT COMING TO NEWCASTLE TO FLATTER HIS AUDIENCE, AS PETER JACKSON DISCOVERS

Mark Steel is still chortling over George Galloway's unexpected victory in the Bradford West by-election.

"It's extraordinary," he says. "How can anybody not find that funny? I tell you what, my missus a week ago said: 'Mark, stick some money on George Galloway, I've just got a feeling he's going to win'.

"He was 11-1 at the time. In great detail I explained, using all my knowledge of politics and socio-economic this-that-and-the-other

why it was not possible for him to win. Imagine the position I'm in now."

This former member of the Socialist Workers' Party is renowned for his radical left wing politics and comedy. But when he brings his Mark Steel's in Town show to Newcastle's The Stand Comedy Club on Tuesday 24th April he'll be looking for material in the more distant past, as his routine is based largely on the history of wherever he's performing. When he did a recording in

Gateshead for the radio programme which inspired the tour he was intrigued that the town's – often violent – rivalry with Newcastle went back several centuries. He was also particularly delighted to discover the story of Dunston-born Harry Clasper, one of the most famous Victorian sportsmen who made his name by – of all things – rowing. Not that the routine is all history. He says: "I have visited the new-money Cheshire town of Wilmslow, the residence of the Rooneys and

assorted footballers, where a card in the Post Office window, that you might expect to say 'Pram for Sale', said, 'Ring me if you need a Butler.'" He doesn't want to give away any of his Newcastle material, but he does say he isn't coming up to grovel to his audience.

"I don't think there's a lot of mileage in going up to a place and telling everyone that they were marvellous – 'I just love it here in Newcastle' – that's the sort of thing Engelbert Humperdinck might do. I don't think I'd be much of a comic if I did that. A comic would get up in Newcastle and say, 'Oh, I wish I was in Gateshead'."

Not that he's planning any sort of aggressive piss-takes.

"If you do it properly you can get away with it. If you do it in a way that just annoys everyone you're obviously doing it wrong. I think there's something in your eye that gives you away if you really are looking down on people.

"There's a sense in Britain that we understand a bit how we look to outsiders, like pronouncing certain places completely different to the way they are spelt and people are fine with that and understand it in a way that maybe in America they perhaps wouldn't get, they would just think, well that's the way we do it."

The show demands a lot of research, which is plainly easier for bigger and better known places such as Newcastle or Glasgow, where you don't need to look far to find one of the local football teams has just gone bust. But in many ways Steel prefers the provincial backwaters.

"In Halesworth in East Anglia I went in the newsagent and there was a big mynah bird in there that squawks away and you could do stuff about that and everybody knows about it, whereas in the bigger cities people don't quite identify in the same way,

though they might identify with one area like Jesmond."

He's been in the stand-up game for 30 years in which time it has gone from fringe to very much mainstream.

"There were only a handful of clubs then. In London there were only about five places that did stuff regularly. Now they are just everywhere. Also people have now got people to copy so it's much more professional. When we started it was much more anarchic, I think it's lost a bit, there was a bit more of a sense of mischief then."

Since then he has become, if not a household name, certainly well-known,

with regular appearances on Radio 4, on the telly on Have I Got News For You and Question Time

and with columns in serious

newspapers. Has this radical become –

whisper it – part of the

establishment?

"I think there's a bit of every comic – no matter how manic and anarchic – that wants to be presenting Strictly Come Dancing. You wouldn't do it if you weren't a show-off and the more people you can show off to the better, but it's probably just as well that I don't because I probably wouldn't be able to resist the temptation to trip Nancy Dell'Olio up with a broom or something." And we'd probably all pay good money for that.



THERE'S A SENSE IN BRITAIN THAT WE UNDERSTAND HOW WE LOOK TO OUTSIDERS



A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS



**SHAUN HARRISON
BOX OFFICE SUPERVISOR AT
TYNESIDE CINEMA**

It seems the weather has taken a turn for the better at the moment, and I've been enjoying going to Leazes Park. It's behind St James Park football ground but if you're new to the city you might not know about it. It's quite big, there's a lake and a bandstand, people playing football and having fun. There's police going around, making sure everyone's alright, so there's a nice atmosphere. It'd be a nice place to go when the weather's not as good too, but it's even better when the sun's out!

There's a play area for children, sometimes at the top end there's some cows grazing, which is nice to see. When the weather's hot the boats come out on the lake and you can go boating, there are plenty of ducks and you can go fishing too. I love the amount of green space.

There's a little shop there, but you're so close to the city centre you can get a picnic or a barbecue and relax in the park. It's easy to get to and it's definitely the biggest park in Newcastle and the best too, in my opinion. If you're in the city centre and you want a nice stroll around, it's definitely worth checking out.