

ES
Magazine

21.10.16

FROM
QUEEN
*Alexandra
Shulman
tells all*

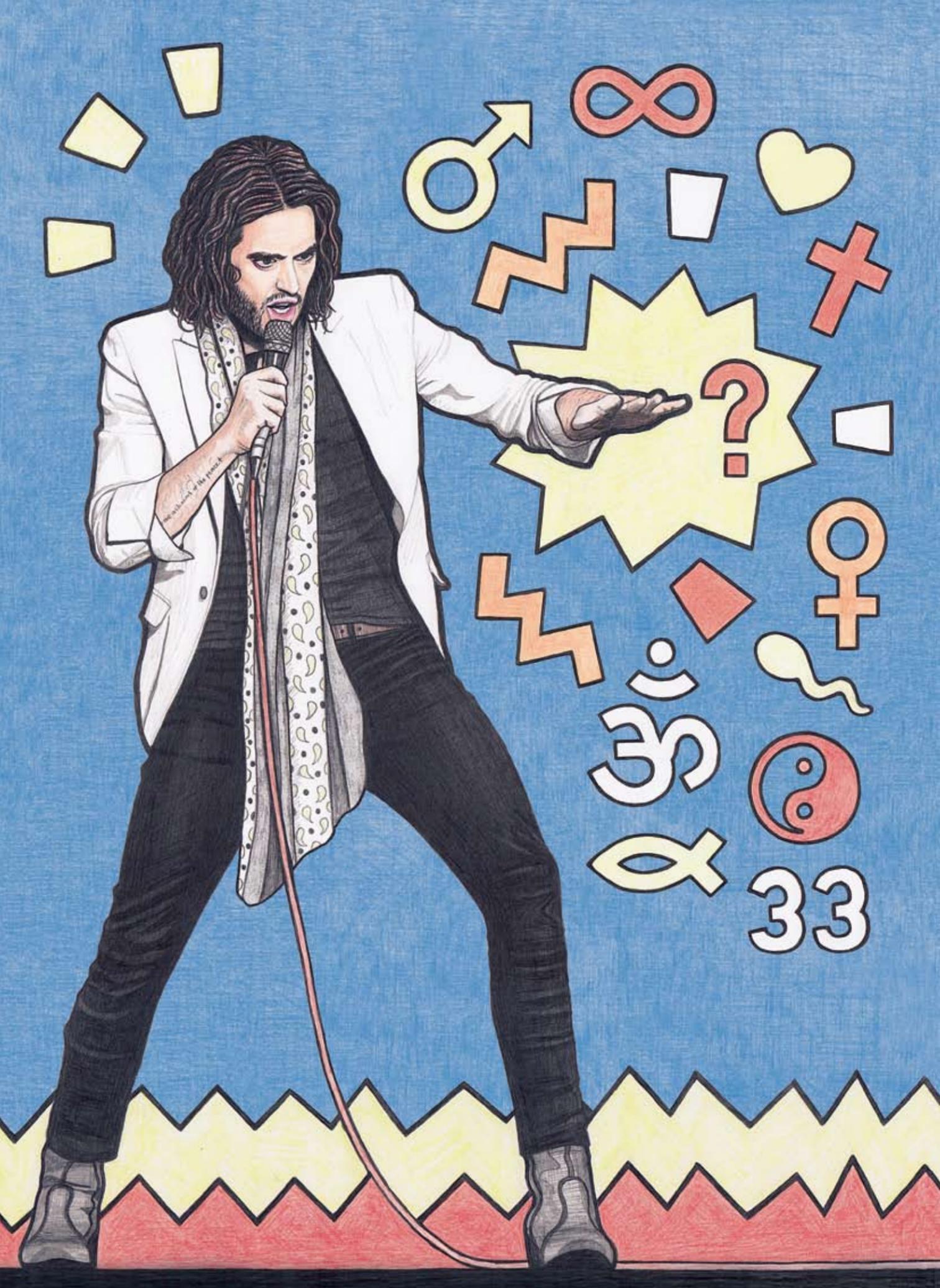
RHYTHM OF
THE NIGHT

HOW *Londoners*
party NOW

PATERNITY
TEST

One man's
IVF journey

Look who's
BACK!
Russell
Brand



Russell's *re-brand*

He's the divisive comic who took on the establishment — and lost. Now he's studying at SOAS and expecting his first child. *Elaine Lipworth* is granted unprecedented access to the world of Russell Brand...

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MAYA WILD

D

o you want a cuddle?' asks Russell Brand, fixing me with his enormous brown eyes, smiling and wrapping his long arms around me. It's certainly an unusual situation in which to find yourself, mid-interview. We are sitting in a sunny office at DreamWorks Animation

Studios in Glendale, California, and are supposed to be discussing the 41-year-old comic, actor, and sometime activist's role in the animated blockbuster *Trolls*. But then, perhaps I shouldn't be surprised — with Brand, I learn it's best to expect the unexpected.

The cuddle is intended as an apology. The usually loquacious star has lost his voice. 'I've got a bad cold and can't talk much,' he whispers. Bearded, wearing black-leather trousers and a tie-dyed sweater, this is the first UK interview he's given for 18 months. He's kept a low profile ever since that controversial interview at his London home with former Labour leader Ed Miliband, prior to last year's general election. Brand had urged his 12 million Twitter followers not to vote, called for the dismantling of the political system — or 'revolution' as his 2014 book was called — only, at the 11th hour, to endorse Labour after the deadline for voter registration was up. Blamed by many when the party lost, he stepped back from Twitter and took a break from his hugely popular current affairs-themed YouTube channel, *The Trews*, though he returned last week with an episode on Donald Trump. 'What I was looking at was much too limiting,' he says. 'What I learned is that I was right in the first place; the system will preserve itself. Now I'm focused on what's best for human beings.'

Now Brand — who was expelled from several schools, never took A levels and was asked to leave the Italia Conti stage school for drug use and poor attendance — is now focusing on education and has enrolled at SOAS, London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, to

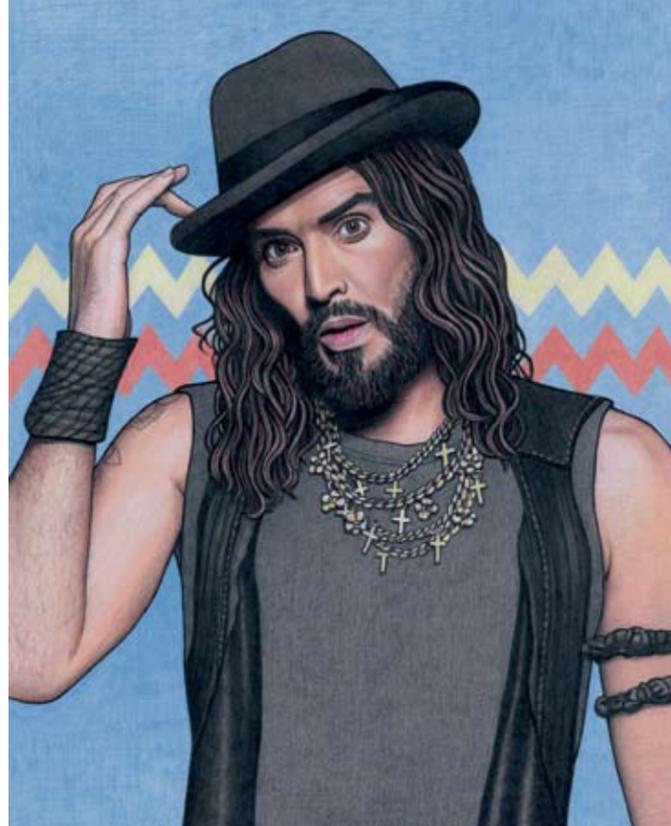
study Religion in Global Politics. 'I am very interested in the role that religion and spirituality will play in the further formulation of world events and how secular societies are held together,' he says. 'The old idea [about politics] is dead and people don't know what's replacing it yet, so I'm spending some time discovering what it is. I'd like to understand what the deep truths are of Islam, Bahá'ism, Christianity; I want to know more.'

It's not the only change in his life. Together with fiancée Laura Gallacher, 27, sister of TV presenter Kirsty, Brand left London last year and bought a house in Henley-on-Thames. 'It is very calm. I look at the chickens, they hatch some eggs. Basically I'm like a village idiot — just looking at livestock.' The couple are expecting their first child imminently. 'I feel lit up by the idea,' he says.

It's quite a transformation. Brand has a longstanding reputation as a womaniser, having been linked to a string of high-profile women including Kate Moss and Courtney Love. There was also a short-lived marriage to the American pop star Katy Perry, whom he met in 2009 when she filmed a cameo for his film *Get Him to the Greek* and married in 2010 in an extravagant Hindu ceremony in Rajasthan (they divorced the following year with Brand citing irreconcilable differences) and a relationship with Jemima Khan. When I ask what's different now, he complains that journalists 'intuitively try to place the organic experience I am having into an existing, predetermined template'. He throws out a 'typical' example of a headline he says would be misleading, to illustrate his point: '*It all changed for Russell when he met his Laura*'. He says the relationship hasn't changed him — his internal transformation has made him 'more available' for a lasting partnership, 'because I am no longer looking to the external world to resolve my problems. If I feel connected spiritually, then I find that I am happy and I am a good boyfriend'.

Still, he says: 'There is constant conflict between the primal drives: the drive to procreate, the drive to survive,





he alienated many fans in the notorious 2008 ‘Sachsgate’, when Brand and Jonathan Ross left obscene messages on *Fawlty Towers* star Andrew Sachs’s answering machine. He has since apologised for the prank.

These days, he says, he’s focusing on ‘being kind to people, being loving’. Last March, he announced he would use money from *Revolution* to open the Trew Era Café on Hackney’s New Era housing estate employing recovering drug addicts. The project has just been donated to rehab charity RAPt (the Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust) where Brand is a patron. ‘I recognise that I feel happier when I do things that have a positive impact on other people,’ he says, before telling me that he has to end the interview because ‘I’ve only got about nine syllables left in my little throat’. We’ve been together for 45 minutes.

I return to DreamWorks to continue our discussion the following morning and find that Brand is still hoarse, but feeling better. There’s another hug. Around us, the walls are decorated with posters for *Trolls*. Inspired by the cute/ugly naked dolls with rainbow-coloured hair, the film explores the nature of happiness. The ridiculously cheerful singing and dancing trolls live in a forest utopia, led by Princess Poppy (Anna Kendrick). Their sworn enemies, the Bergens, are miserable monsters (led by John Cleese) who hunt down trolls and eat them at their ritualistic feast day, Trollstice.

“It’s very calm — I look at the chickens, they hatch some eggs. I’m like a village idiot”

Justin Timberlake is the film’s executive music producer and also voices the character Branch. It’s highly entertaining — and Brand is funny playing Creek, a troll. ‘Whoever does casting at DreamWorks is very skilful,’ he laughs. Brand was attracted to the positive theme. ‘If you make a decision to be positive like the Trolls, life will be more abundant than if you zombie around in Bergen Town cannibalising adorable trolls,’ he muses. One of the appealing characteristics of the Trolls is that they wear flower watches that light up on the hour, reminding them to hug regularly. ‘Hugging releases oxytocins, a self-manufactured chemical,’ says Brand. ‘If we hug each other more and love each other more, then we’re making a commitment to move closer to one another — it’s an essentially optimistic act.’

Twenty minutes in, Brand has to leave again, but his manager Nik assures me that I will have more time with him when his voice returns. A few weeks later, back in London, I’m summoned to meet him at Electric House in Notting Hill, where I wait in a book-lined room. Brand doesn’t appear. Forty-five minutes pass and I get a text informing me that he is now at The Mitre, a pub in Holland Park. It takes 20 minutes to find a taxi; the traffic is gridlocked. Frazzled, I arrive



Brand new: right, with Laura Gallacher

and the drive to have status. But I am no longer deluded as to what may provide happiness.’ His rural retreat suits him: ‘I’m so much happier over the course of the day to see one or two people and a few chickens, that’s a good way of living.’

Suddenly, he takes my Cath Kidston notebook, rips out a page, and starts doodling: hearts and stars. ‘One can tell from your flowery notebook that you are a sweet person,’ he says. I grab the book back. ‘You’re protective of your notebook?’ I say he’s trying to distract me; people still want to hear his views; they are interested in him.

‘People are interested in pornography...’ he flings back. ‘We’ve got an obligation to talk about things that are relevant.’

He argues that it is ridiculous that observers describe his critique of capitalism — in *Revolution* and elsewhere — as hypocritical, claiming that his personal wealth and lifestyle have nothing to do with his populist views. ‘I’m not going to let other people tie me down with hard and fast rules of whether I’m allowed to have Nike shoes. I don’t remember saying everyone should become a monk.’

Long before dabbling in politics, Brand was a provocateur. He started out in stand-up, then became an MTV presenter — only to be fired after coming to work dressed as Osama bin Laden on the day after the September 11 attacks and bringing his drug dealer to the studios. Yet he continued to surprise, producing two acclaimed memoirs: *My Booky Wook* and *My Booky Wook 2*, chronicling his difficult childhood growing up in Grays, Essex, with his mother Barbara and his battles with addiction. He developed a successful career as a stand-up comic but



to find Brand, yoga-teacher serene in white-cotton trousers, a grey T-shirt, silky gold scarf, wooden beads and Nikes, his hair tied in two buns, languidly chatting to the woman behind the bar.

‘Elaine, I’ve been waiting all afternoon, where have you been?’ he exclaims in mock fury.

Waiting for you at the Electric.

‘That’s not the sort of place I’d go to,’ he deadpans... and so it goes on.

Exasperating? Yes. But Brand wins you over. Waxing lyrical about the pleasures of country life, ‘walking by the river’ with his fiancée, their cats, Morrissey and Jericho, and his German shepherd, Bear, he’s charismatic and charming company. ‘I felt very peaceful. I’m enjoying rural life because there’s less stimulation.’ He hasn’t abandoned London, he insists. ‘Sometimes I am here for work, I go to watch West Ham. I go to the National [Theatre], I saw *The Caretaker* (the recent production of Harold Pinter’s play with Timothy Spall) at the Old Vic.’

Sober for 13 years, Brand’s writing a book about addiction to be published next September. ‘Addiction is about the way you relate to the outside world. If you’re lucky, you’ll get a substance misuse problem, which drills it right down. If you’re not lucky, you’ll have a food, sex or spending issue; those things are insidious because they’re culturally endorsed, they’re habitual.’

Addiction should, he argues ‘be regarded like autism’. He says: ‘Everybody is somewhere on the spectrum. If you look at your own life, what is it you do that isn’t good for you and you can’t stop doing, even if it is seemingly innocuous, like the way you watch TV.’

“I’m very excited about becoming a dad and I’m preparing myself”

For the past seven years, Brand has meditated twice daily, a practice he was introduced to by director David Lynch, who runs a global Transcendental Meditation foundation. ‘I commune with the inner world relatively frequently or else I get a bit barmy.’ He takes my notebook again and doodles: ‘Hearts then a bit of a spiral, then a staircase...’ he says as he does it. Does he believe in God? ‘Yes, but I haven’t devoted myself to any specific “thing” [religion] or teacher,’ he says before, 20 minutes in, suddenly breaking off again and announcing that he has to leave for his next appointment. But not before promising yet another interview.

Our final encounter is on the phone a month later. He sounds buoyant. ‘I’m very excited about becoming a dad and I’m preparing myself. I am just getting ready to be with a new little person and see what it is they want.’ He doesn’t know the baby’s sex: ‘I might never find out. I may never look!’

He says Laura is busy ‘decorating the nursery.’



Notoriety: (top, from left) Brand and Jonathan Ross; *The Trews* with Ed Miliband. Above, in *The Bill* in 1994. Left, with Jemima Khan, and far left, ex-wife Katy Perry. Below, with his mum

Around domestic issues, my vote is often secondary... Or the vote of my gender at least, so I will just wait to see what is determined.’

As a child, he says, he was ‘a very solitary, mischievous, unremarkable little boy. The first time that I performed when I was 14 was the happiest moment in my life, in a school play (*Bugsy Malone*), and I didn’t want to do anything else ever again’. When he was eight, his mother contracted uterine cancer and then breast cancer. His father — who took him on a ‘sex tourism’ holiday in the Far East when he was 17 — was largely absent and his relationship with his stepfather was strained. These days he takes a philosophical view of his upbringing. ‘I always had this tremendous sense that I could do whatever I wanted, probably from a combination of my mother’s devotion and my father’s sense of “can-do” individualism.’ He remains close to his mother. ‘She’s very well and she’s so excited to become a grandmother. She’s a beautiful, kind woman who taught me through example that it’s really important to be compassionate, loving and understanding, to put other people before yourself.’

Will it be difficult not to spoil their child, who unlike him, will enjoy a privileged upbringing? ‘I’m just going to be really loving and giving; I will do what my parents did, which was their best. It seems the thing that is important is that children know that they can trust you and be open with you.’

Our interview over, Brand says he hopes I have enough material. ‘It’s hilarious,’ he laughs, ‘I’ve never been so in touch [with a journalist] in my f**king life. You’ve got enough for a four-hour documentary, the definitive biography. This has been a thorough, coruscating, CAT scan of a man’s soul, an MRI of a man’s identity.’ He chuckles again. ‘It is all going to be all right, you know?’

My article or life in general?

‘Both; life more importantly.’ And with a friendly farewell in lieu of a hug, the intriguing Russell Brand hangs up.

‘Trolls’ is in cinemas on Friday.

