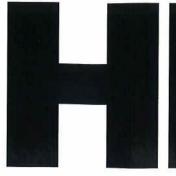


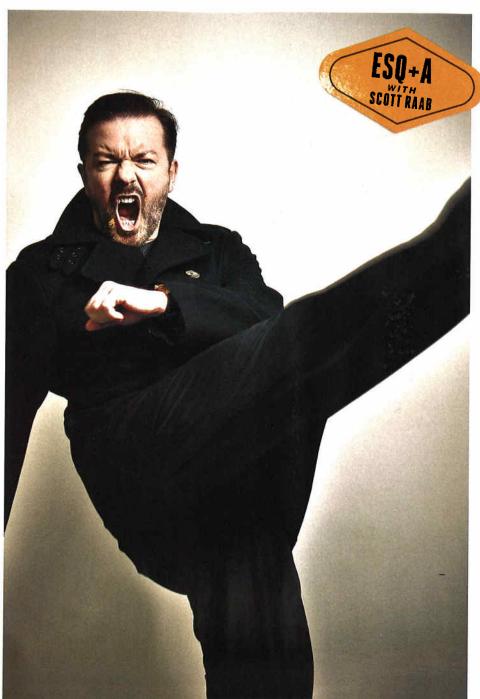
Number of minutes elapsed in the interview below before Gervais quotes Churchill.







CONTEXT-FREE HIGHLIGHT: "... eternal friendship, the magnificence of their country, the beauty of women, and any other damn thing that pops into your heads."



Ricky Gervais

TALKS TO SCOTT RAAB ABOUT CHURCHILL, CALIGULA, GANDHI, BEING INVITED BACK TO THE GLOBES, AND WHY HE'LL NEVER HOST THE OSCARS. AND HONESTY.

Lunch at the executive dining room in the HBO building, New York City.

SCOTT RAAB: You look fabulous. If you turn sideways, I don't know if I can even see you. RICKY GERVAIS: Thank you.

SR: The blood is rushing to my loins. [To waitress] I'll have the fruit plate, please.

RG: Can I just get coffee, please?

SR: You're not eating at all? RG: It's messy to eat and talk. [Looks out the window.] Wow! Come on!

SR: Your first trip to the city? RG: Look at that. I don't get sick of that.

SR: I didn't even notice the view. That's how focused I am on this interview. You have things written on your hand? RG: "Greatest hits, cancer, Alz-

heimer's, obesity, glandular, fat girl, fried chicken, AIDS." Last night, I did a benefit for wounded soldiers with Bob Woodruff [ABC journalist severely injured in Iraq in 2006]. Me and Springsteen and Jon Stewart. It was fantastic.

SR: Do you consider yourself a workaholic?

RG: Yeah. But as Winston Churchill said, "If you find a job you really love, you'll never work again."

SR: Churchill's ratings weren't as high as yours.

RG: Churchill's advisors once came to him and said, "We're going to stop all funding for

CONTINUED





1961
Born.
1979
Moves
to London.

1983 Gervais-led pop duo Seona Dancing peaks at number 79 on pop charts. 2001 The Office premieres on BBC Two. 2005 Extras airs on HBO. 2006 Interviews Garry Shandling for Ricky Gervais Meets, then cancels series. **2010–2012** Hosts the Golden Globes.

RICKY GERVAIS CONTINUED

the arts so we can put that into the war effort." And Churchill said, "Then what are we fighting for?" Sends a chill down my spine. Incredible.

SR: Any regret about your act at the Golden Globes?

RG: I stand by everything. You shouldn't apologize for anything you meant to do. You can apologize for things you do when you're 15, but not when you're 50. People confuse the subject of the joke with the target of the joke, and they're very rarely the same. Let's get this in perspective: They're the wealthiest, most privileged people in the world. Offense is taken, not given. It's your choice.

SR: And I'm not even sure who's acting and who's genuinely taking offense.

RG: Imagine if I had gone out there and said, "We're all in the same gang. Aren't we brilliant? Us millionaires together." There was a Roman emperor that hired someone to whisper "You're just a man" in his ear as he walked around the crowds. Just to remind him, because he knew if everyone tells you you're a god, then you are. And so he hired someone to say "You're just a man."

SR: This was not Caligula.
RG: "Never mind the man.
Where's the fuckin' horse?"
SR: Would you ever do the
Oscars?

RG: They wouldn't let me do it my way. I don't think they could afford to. The first time the Globes asked me, I said, "Can I say what I want?" They said, "Yeah." Second time, I said same again. They went, "Yeah." The Oscars would never. I just don't think they'd ever trust me. Nor should they. If I was them,



Gervais (right) and Stephen Merchant and the back of dwarf actor Warwick Davis's head in *Life's Too Short*, airing on HBO this month.

I'd say, "Well, don't hire Gervais. You're asking for it." I'm not a wolf in sheep's clothing. I'm a wolf in wolf's clothing. SR: What Chris Rock did to Jude Law-why wouldn't they let Gervais have at it? RG: I think Hollywood's gotten more reactionary and conservative over the years, because there's no longer art in Hollywood. Art suffers in Hollywood. HBO took art away from Hollywood and put it on the screen, okay? If The Wire was a film, it would be in and out of cinemas in an hour because it wasn't performing. The only innovation in Hollywood is technology. Give me two people talking about something. Give me a bit of humanity. It's fundamental to the human aspect, storytelling. SR: So's discomfort, and there aren't many comics who can

mine that vein. I mean, we've got you, we've got Larry David, we've got Louis C.K.-RG: He's the greatest standup at the moment. And there's someone on his tail as well-Doug Stanhope. It's all to do with honesty. Never fear the truth. No bad can come of discussing a true subject. No bad at all. Gandhi said, "There is no higher god than the truth." SR: You're a committed atheist. No doubt whatsoever? RG: I have no choice. I can't help what I believe. Probably the most offensive thing I ever said was "Thank God for making me an atheist." It was a swipe at all those people who thank God because they won an award. How arrogant is that? There's war and famine and God's going, "Know what Bullock? Write a speech. I'm not going to say

anything, Sandra, but write a speech. That's all I'm saying." **SR:** You were a philosophy major. I assume to some degree that that study has informed your career.

RG: I think comedy has to be an intellectual pursuit. It comes down to logic and analysis. As soon as it becomes emotional, it's not comedy anymore. That's why real racist jokes or sexist jokes aren't funny-not because they're offensive, but because they're not true. As soon as a joke is based on an untruth, it's not funny. If the premise isn't true, I don't want to hear the punchline, because it's built on sand. I think the big questions are more interesting than the little ones. Why are we here? What's the point? Good and evil. Love, hate. The Invention of Lying was criticized because of its ambition, and I think it confused a few people. It started out as a high-concept fantasy joke, then went into philosophy territory, and ended up a 1950s romantic comedy. SR: I know it didn't find its footing in terms of box office. RG: Well, I think it's the 25-year plan. All my favorite thingspeople find them. I don't care when people find them. Spinal Tap-it's an amazing film. Christopher Guest has never let me down.

SR: Last time we talked, you said Guest told you that if you want a bunch of assholes at a focus group to like your films, you should write the screenplays with them.

RG: Both films I've done, I took the focus group notes home, and I didn't look at them.

SR: You saved the notes? **RG:** I'm thinking of doing standup around them.

SR: After the first season of the American *Office*, they changed Steve Carell's character. They softened him. Because he was a dick.

RG: They took some of the existential darkness away. But they should, really. Americans are different. Americans are brought up to believe they can grow up to be the president of the United States. Brits are told, It won't happen to you. This is why *Idol* was such a success. American kids came out thinking they're going to be the next Mariah Carey, and they had the dark destroyer, Simon Cowell, saying, "Give up." Which is good advice.



LIAM NEESON'S WOLF FIGHTING

The Grey amounts to: Part 1: Plane crashes in the Alaska wilderness. Part 2: Liam Neeson and a few other survivors get relentlessly attacked by wolves. The wolves aren't even that real. They're almost allegorical. You see them occasionally. You see puffs of their breath coming out of a stand of trees. You hear them howling—but with reverb. One of the best scenes: It's nighttime. The men are huddled around a fire. A wolf attacks. One of the survivors stabs it, kills it. In the distance, wolves howl. Neeson: "Let's get a large branch, sharpen the end of it, and shove it up this thing's ass. We're gonna cook this son of a bitch. Then we're gonna eat it." And then they do. But the wolves keep coming. Great movie.

—ROSS MCCAMMON









MOHANDAS GANDHI Indian civil-rights activist and antipoverty crusader.





KARL
PILKINGTON
Enigmatic savant,
The Ricky Gervais Show cohost.

RICKY GERVAIS CONTINUED

SR: We all just want to be famous. Is that so wrong?
RG: There's no difference between fame and infamy now.
There's a new school of professional famous people that don't do anything. They don't create anything. You should make something. You should bring something into the world that wasn't in the world before. It doesn't matter what that is. It doesn't matter if it's a table or a film or gardening—everyone

It's Liam Neeson: the new John Wayne, the man who doesn't do trivial stuff. Honestly, the outtakes from that scene take up 50 percent of the blooper reel. It was amazing. I'm excited for Warwick. I don't think he's going to know what's hit him. He's going to be the comedy sensation of the next year.

SR: It was innately funny to see a dwarf in every shot.

a dwarr in every snot.

RG: It's actually incidental by
the end of it that he's short. He's

to everything for one year. You get handed a big pile of good-will when you come into this business. Put some of it into the bank. Don't use it up in a weekend doing 50 panel shows.

SR: Did you say no?
RG: Still do. I only do my own thing. Only I can ruin my career now. I don't work for anyone.
I always knew I had to be 100 percent in charge, even when I was a middle manager. I used to say to my boss, "Just give me enough rope and then fire me."
SR: Not to segue awkwardly, but

you really are in great shape. RG: I think I'm in the best shape since I was about 28. I might even take in more calories than I did when I was heavy, because I treat food like fuel now. I can eat puddings every night and I think, This is going to be terrible—and I've only gained two pounds. Because the body goes, "It's all right. We know." The only reason you should work out is to live longer. To have good food and good wine, which are up there with friends. We have this illusion of free will. and we like things. So I want to fill those 80 years with things I like. It's as simple as that. SR: It's interesting to hear the

phrase "illusion of free will"

tossed off like that.

RG: We're cells.

SR: We are. RG: We're the

RG: We're things. SR: We're animals.

RG: We're leaves. What makes us think that we've got free will is this self-consciousness.

SR: And knowledge of mortality, which I'm not sure every animal has.

RG: They certainly haven't. SR: My dog, I believe he does,

but that's my dog.

RG: I think some primates would probably feel grief with death and know.

SR: Did anyone reinforce the idea for you that the sky was the limit-that you could become a figure of worldwide renown? RG: No. I grew up in a very working-class suburb. My dad was a laborer. My mum was a housewife. She tried her best, and she knew that education was the answer. And if not for the welfare state-I went to university with no money. I can't understand a society that wouldn't give a poor person the same opportunity as a rich person. SR: It must be a joy for the folks to see you doing your thing. RG: They were proud of me before-my mum and dad are dead. My mum didn't see The Office. My dad caught the first season

SR: You seem to be always

"Genius is firstly innate ability, then 10,000 hours work. Louis C.K. and Chris Rock have put in the 10,000 hours, and I don't feel I have yet."

should create. You should do something, then sit back and say, "I did that."

SR: That's how you find beauty. Or truth. Make something yourself.

RG: One of my favorite phrases growing up was "A camel is a horse designed by committee." I told that to Karl Pilkington [Gervais's cohost on HBO's The Ricky Gervais Show] and he said, "Well, I'd ask them all: Who came up with the hump?" He's amazing because I can never predict his reaction. He's a true artist, because he sees the world differently.

SR: Has his life changed since The Ricky Gervais Show?
RG: He's only let his circumstances change. He hasn't changed. His buddies haven't changed. His friends haven't changed. His girlfriend hasn't changed. All he's got is more money so he can get a nicer house.

SR: He has an odd purity. RG: He has no filter. He's without malice and he's like a child. You know when a child points at someone of difference at a supermarket? Karl does that. That's the other thing as well about taboo: That child shouldn't be dragged away. Warwick Davis, the dwarf actor in Life's Too Short, says when he sees people staring and kids dragged away, he wants to say, "Bring the kid over. I want to talk to him." Brilliant. SR: The Liam Neeson episodein which he's showing you his

improv skills-was as rip-roar-

ing as anything I've ever seen.

RG: We thought, Well, who's

the best person for this job?

angry. He wants respect. He says things like, "I'm the Martin Luther King of little people," and falls out of his Range Rover because it's too big for him. You should have got a smaller car, you know? Warwick is actually drenched in humanity. We can make him really awful, and you still love him. And he's indestructible as well. I've never seen him complain about his lot. He's not the best dwarf comedy actor in the world; he's one of the best comedy actors in the world. I told him to say no

DANCHAON'S NEW BOOK STAY AWAKE



These days it seems like people are always looking for the lie in nonfiction—and in fiction, they're looking for the truth. The stories in Dan Chaon's *Stay Awake* (Ballantine, \$25) exist in a shadow land somewhere in between. They were written in the years after his wife, the writer Sheila Schwartz, died.

Grief and regret and absence are his central characters. Couples divorce. Loved ones die in car crashes and fires, from cancer and suicide. Children are abandoned or abandon their parents. This unrelenting sense of loss and confusion is often blended with the supernatural, the everyday made extraordinary. A baby is born with a parasitic head fused to the top of her skull—a head that appears as aware as she does, smiling and smack-

head fused to the top of her skull—a head that appears as aware as she does, smiling and smacking its gums—and the parents must decide whether to sever them, to choose one. A boy wakes up screaming in the night. His father thumps toward his room believing he is hearing "the sound of a young child dying violently—falling from a building, or caught in some machinery that is tearing an arm off." The boy has trouble remembering his dreams; his father has trouble remembering his previous abusive life. He doesn't know why he wakes up on the living-room floor naked. He doesn't know how a fire breaks out upstairs and reduces his family to ash.

If Chaon's 2001 novel, *Among the Missing*, which was nominated for a National Book Award, contained some of the best fiction written in the past 20 years, *Stay Awake* is its darker, more unsettling cousin. These stories are defined by disturbing unreliability, with just enough room between the characters' memories, like the space between trees in a dark forest, to slip through, get lost.

"Memory's not all it's cracked up to be," one of the characters says, though any of them could have said it. They are men and women, old and young, but their overall effect is that of a hall of mirrors with many cracks running through the glass, projecting over and over again a ruined, mysterious vision of the everyday, both fiction and fact.

—BENJAMIN PERCY

M HB

BRICKY GERVAIS CONTINUED

working on the next project. **RG**: Because there's nothing as perfect as the initial idea. And the only reason I write and direct is to protect the writing, because that's what's most precious.

SR: But two seasons of anything and you're done.

RG: The most important thing in comedy-apart from empathy, which I think is important even if disguised—is surprise. I like surprising people with the fact that something's even a joke at all. I did a joke yesterday for the first time live. I wrote it and I got excited. I couldn't wait to do this joke about how I had told my four-year-old niece that her mummy had died. I told them I couldn't console hershe just wanted her mummy back. So I told her, "Your mummy's in heaven. She's looking down on you." And I asked the audience, "Is that so bad?" The audience went quiet, then they went, "No." And I said, "It was bad. Her mummy hadn't died. She'd just gone to the shops." I loved the fact that they're with me and I'm nearly crying.

sr: That's a kind of catharsis. A cleansing experience.

RG: It's jumping when the parachute isn't open yet. It's a leap of faith.

sr: For you as well.

RG: Yes. I'm getting them to jump out of the plane with me, and I promise the parachute will open. I promise the parachute will open.

SR: Chris Rock and Louis C. K. have said much the same thing. RG: They're masters at their trade, though. I don't work as hard at a joke as they do. Someone said genius is firstly innate ability and then 10,000 hours work. Louis C. K. and Chris Rock have put in the 10,000 hours, and I don't feel I have yet. Not as a comedian.

have yet. Not as a comedian. SR: It's vocational training. RG: There's a great phrase: Boredom is the wish for a hobby. I love looking at things and going, I can do this. Honor is a gift a man gives himself. You can be as good as anyone that ever lived. If you can read, you can learn everything that anyone ever learned. But you've got to want it.



The Appendix: Gervais's secondfavorite comedian, see page 52.



Jennifer Aniston

ON THE OCCASION OF WANDERLUST

BY TOM CHIARELLA

'm Embarrassed to Say sounds a little like a Jennifer Aniston movie, doesn't it? Maybe one that went straight to video, before you ever heard of Rachel Green, or knew anything about Brad Pitt's not wanting, then his wanting, of children. Sure it does. Sure It Does also sounds like a Jennifer Aniston

movie. I know, right? And so on.

I just have to say: And So On really, really sounds like a Jennifer Aniston movie, from her early period, when she struggled to shake Rachel from her lovely bones, but it isn't. So does I Just Have to Say. A good title for one of her zanier offerings, from the time she veered toward playing free spirits—like in Along Came Polly. It wasn't. But really, in so many ways, it could have been. Please note the three potential titles of Jennifer Aniston movies in that phrase: 1) But Really, 2) In So Many Ways, and 3) It Could Have Been. See also: Please Note.

What does this mean? This question itself (What Does This Mean?) feels very much like the title of a more recent Jennifer Aniston effort, the kind in which she appears willing to show the first glisten of her age. It seems like a title she might now use to ask questions about being 42, about having been dragged through the streets of Tabloidtown by Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Not exactly waterboarding, though it's clear she's taken a kind of beating. And all she does is work.

You expected her to fail to muster that grit, to lose her looks, to flounce through toplining a couple of well-cast, post-*Friends* comedies before flopping to the conclusion that what she possessed was TV Talent. Long ago, one would have

expected her collapse under the pressuredome of life inside a never-ending pile of supermarket magazine covers. She persisted. And whereas once she merely seemed overly fragile, it slowly became the case that her characters started to have some sand in their pants. Aniston was suddenly ballsy enough to screw Clive Owen out of his money in the weirdly successful *Derailed*, to actually make us pause to consider the real hurt in *The Break-Up*, and more recently to show up, somewhat unrecognizable and dark-hearted in *Horrible Bosses*, as a cock-grabbing dentist, stealing scenes from scene stealer Charlie Day.

How did this happen? How did it happen that her movies, individually not all that good, became a class of commercial film—arguably more yeomanlike and broadly successful than the oeuvre of Angelina Jolie? How did it happen that I somehow got to the point where I've seen nearly every Jennifer Aniston film on that list?

I can't answer that. Not accurately. Her movies fill up the lesser cable networks on craptastic rainy Saturdays when I have a condition vaguely like the flu. Her movies pop up on Netflix at the very moment I need to watch a movie, any movie, to be extra quiet, not laugh at all, and remain a bit clamped to the screen by her earnest exasperation with the male characters she so often works off of. Once, she got better on *Friends*, until she was carrying that whole pack of schnorers to the bank every week. I believe she's actually getting better in feature films. Will she make important movies? She just might. Which—need I say?—would make a good title for a Jennifer Aniston movie.



THE FIRST TWO THIRDS OF MAN ON A LEDGE

Man on a Ledge can be a great movie if you're willing to do one thing: Leave. The first hour of the film, during which an escaped convict tries desperately to prove his innocence, is all excitement and explosions and Genesis Rodriguez. But then the director trips up on closure. It's an offensive hand-holding that drags you to foregone conclusions you'd have done a better job imagining on your own. Which is exactly what you should do.

—PETER MARTIN