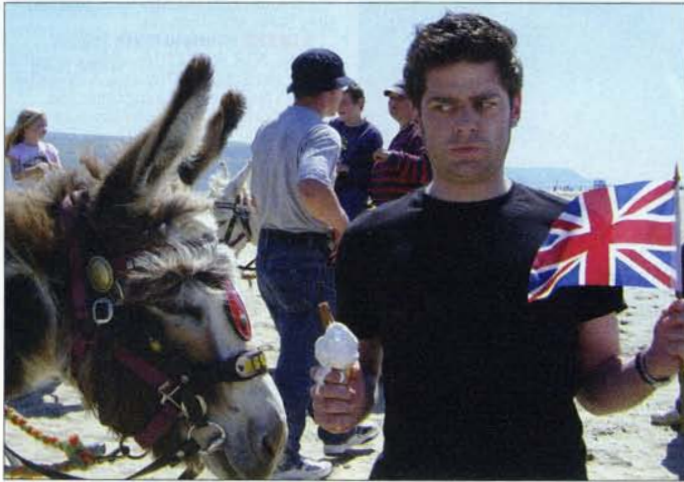


Comedy



Oh, we do like to be beside the seaside *Beach boy Mark Allen*

Making his story

Malcolm Hay speaks to Mark Allen about his one-man celebration of Great Britain's birthday

Up to a year ago Mark Allen knew next to nothing about British history. 'As teenagers, we'd spent most of our time being taught what rotters the Nazis were,' he says. 'It left very little time to focus on our own country.' So he bought a book: Norman Davies' *The Isles: A History*. 'It's over 1,000 pages. I'd recommend it to anyone with a few weeks to spare. It amazed me how much I had to learn. It turns out we're a bunch of rotters too.'

His interest snowballed to the point where he resolved to write an hour-long comedy version of the history of Britain. 'There were so many nuggets of wisdom to use, like the fact that William the Conqueror was christened William the Bastard. But historical comedy can get a bit dry. I decided to make it more personal by talking about how I feel being British.'

'Quite Good Britain', the witty and absorbing show he took to last year's Edinburgh Fringe, was the result. 'We have an identity crisis,' Allen maintains. 'Our national animal is African, our Royal Family is German, our national motto is French. Our flag's a hybrid created from three other ones.' The Act of Union in 1707, he argues, was hopelessly optimistic. 'Why expect England, Scotland and Wales to merge seamlessly, when they'd spent the previous 600 years fighting each other? It's the political equivalent of a teacher forcing children who've been fighting in the playground to shake hands. They might pretend to make up, but secretly they're waiting for the next opportunity to gob on the other one's back.'

In 'Quite Good Britain' Allen also takes on the government's shambolic attempts to deal with the identity issue, through lessons on British values and citizenship tests. However, the overriding problem, he concludes, is the name: Great Britain. 'It's a

bit arrogant, isn't it? We're the only country in the world with a superlative in what we call ourselves. I think we'd be a lot happier if we lowered our expectations.'

Allen was raised in Nuneaton: 'A dreary Midlands town. So dreary that, when I moved to Norwich, I thought it was a thriving metropolis.' His first stand-up gig was in front of an audience of 12 in an Islington biker bar. He's played all over the country since. He's currently working on this year's Edinburgh show. For now, though, he's taking an updated version of 'Quite Good Britain' to the Hen & Chickens at Highbury Corner. There's a special reason. He's considered buying party hats, bunting and a birthday cake. On Tuesday, May 1, Great Britain will be exactly 300 years old.

'I went on after telling about torture at the hands of Saddam'

'In most countries such a landmark occasion warrants a public holiday,' Allen contends. 'While I was researching the show, I wrote to my MP about it. She said forward my enquiry to Tony Blair.' Allen heard nothing for seven months. Then, suddenly, he received a letter outlining the government's plans for this grand occasion. Keep your eyes peeled for those commemorative £2 coins.

Last July, not long before Edinburgh, Allen was invited to perform 'Quite Good Britain' at an event in Washington DC. 'It was part of the July 4 celebrations,' he says. 'There were speakers from all over the world. I went on immediately after an Iraqi woman who spent half an hour relating stories of torture at the hands of Saddam Hussein.' Harrowing stuff. 'But not the most ideal of warm-up acts, to be honest.' *Mark Allen's 'Quite Good Britain' is at the Hen & Chickens for four nights from Tuesday.*

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*** Mark Allen's 'Quite Good Britain'** *Hen & Chickens Theatre, N1. Until May 4 at 9.30pm; £6.* An updated version of Allen's very enjoyable show from last year's Edinburgh Fringe where he talks about British identity and why it's so difficult to achieve as well as examining how the name 'Great Britain' doesn't do us any favours. He's scornful, too, of the government's lame attempt to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of the Act of Union with a commemorative £2 coin. See page 53