

# the HARLEQUIN

*Armando Iannucci*

## **An Interview with Armando Iannucci**

Armando Iannucci is a writer and broadcaster, who has written and produced numerous critically acclaimed television and radio comedy shows. The screenplay for his film *In The Loop* (starring Peter Capaldi, Tom Hollander and James Gandolfini) was nominated for an Oscar at the Academy Awards, and his iconic series for BBC, *The Thick of It*, was nominated for 13 BAFTA Awards, winning 5 during its four series run. The latest series of Armando's critically acclaimed HBO comedy *Veep* took home a number of Emmy awards, including Outstanding Comedy Series and Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series. He is currently adapting a new version of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* for the big screen, as well as feature film about the death of Stalin.

**Harlequin:** I thought I'd ask you first about what you tend to call yourself. I've heard you use the word 'collaborator' in the past.

**Armando Iannucci:** I think I call myself "TV Writer and Producer". I like writing on my own but, you know, it's *hard*. It can be isolating. And for some reason it always seems to be more enjoyable and also more productive when I'm doing it with someone else. Just being able to bat ideas backwards and forwards, you end up getting to places that you wouldn't have gotten to yourself. Or it might have taken you longer to get there on your own.

**H:** Does that feed into the fact that, when you're writing for television, you don't necessarily write anything down until a very late stage?

**AI:** It depends what the project is, but with something like Alan Partridge it was either myself or Peter Baynham who would be doing the typing, and Steve Coogan would be part of the conversation but as Alan, often pacing about the room in character. Whereas for other stuff we would be chucking ideas around a table, but at some point you fundamentally have to sit down and work out a script and go through it line by line.

**H:** With Alan was it the case that there was lots of ideas coming together at once? I know Stewart Lee and Richard Herring joke about creating him.

**AI:** What that was is that I asked them to write stuff for Alan to say on his sports reports. But they'd do that separately in another room. And Steve would come up with this voice – it was a radio show so it was just this voice at first – and instantly we knew what his background was and came up with the name right away. But very often with *The Thick of It* or *Veep* where there are whole teams of writers, you'll see one or two writers' names attached to each episode because they're the ones who I've talked with about the initial story. Then they've gone away and written the initial draft but in the meantime each script is passed through the hands of every other writer, so by the end of it no one can quite remember who did what. Sometimes one line is started by one writer and finished by another, with then another adjective inserted into it by a third writer.

**H:** I know you're a fan of Charles Dickens, and people often say Dickens' best characters are his worst people. The ones you wouldn't want to meet but are great to read. I suppose Alan is a bit like that.

**AI:** Yes, because of course Dickens' "good" characters are quite boring. The heroes are all boring. Martin Chuzzlewit, David Copperfield. It's actually Scrooge and it's Quilp and it's Uriah Heap who are interesting. Because his best characters are a sort of exaggeration turned grotesque. Although I'm a big fan of Mr Dick in *David Copperfield* who's just a bit barking mad, but is a very humane person. It's a fantastic depiction – what must be one of the earliest in literature – of someone who is psychologically ...well, ill, really.

**H:** And one of the unbelievable things about Dickens is that all his writings were essentially first drafts.

**AI:** Because he didn't have time. He took on all these commitments, not just committing himself to publicly writing a novel week by week but running a newspaper or a magazine or putting on productions, too. I did a documentary on Dickens for BBC2 and I went to the Dickens Museum down near Bloomsbury and there's a glass cabinet with photos of Dickens, almost one for every year of his life. So there are engravings and portraits from when he was really young, where he's a very angelic looking young man – sort of curly locks and smooth-skinned – and by forty he's growing the beard we associate with him. But there comes a point at around forty-nine when he suddenly looks shot to pieces. His face just shrivels and there are lines everywhere, crumples even. It was just that pace he maintained. He really should have slowed down. But you know he didn't and expired mid-fifties, and it's quite shocking seeing his deterioration.

**H:** Going back to Alan Partridge and talking about the way people develop, it's interesting to see how far he's come since his early days. One of the things that struck me is that in the early shows, we're never invited to enjoy the things Alan enjoys doing along with him. When he's walking down the carriageway singing he just seems to be this loser.

**AI:** Except he's happy. That is one of the happiest moments of his life actually. You know, because he's got a bag of windscreen washer fluid and singing 'Goldfinger'.

**H:** Yes! And yet when he's singing 'Cuddly Toy' in the car during Alpha Papa, he's almost cool.

**AI:** Well you know it's interesting because when we started Alan we thought there was a bit of life in him but we didn't think it would be going for twenty-five years. We've done him every four or five years, and so each time he has a new – the language now is iteration, isn't it? – there's a new iteration of Alan in each project. And what that's meant is that we've watched Alan grow. You know I think as you get older you get less stressed about what people think of you. So I think Alan is comfortable in his own skin now. And he has adapted as well. He would see himself as socially liberal, if not economically.

**H:** And as the shows have gone on it seems like the longer narrative form is the preferred vehicle for Alan.

**AI:** Well Rob and Neil [Gibbons] and Steve who write the show now are much more interested in exploring the depth of the character rather than it being a front or a satire for that type of person. It's better to see what layers are behind him so it's not just this two-dimensional character.

**H:** This is something related to comedy in general, but do you think that when shows started to come out which didn't have a laughed track, they were immediately a bit more like dramas?

**AI:** There's always been a great tradition of comedy on British television and the best comedies feel that they don't always have to be doing a joke all the time. My rule is that if it's not funny then it has to be interesting. But there's a danger that you can start thinking that comedy is the lesser form, like there's that Woody Allen thing of him saying that he really wants to make serious films. The idea that comedy is light. I don't believe that and for me the most satisfying comedies are the ones that take on big subjects, difficult issue. The ones where you can laugh and engage at the same time.

**H:** When you were doing that in *The Thick of It*, a common reaction to the show was this idea that it was a comedy which lampooned politicians. But in another sense the politicians are actually the most normal people in the show, and if anything is being lampooned then it's the expectations of the public.

**AI:** Absolutely. It's the public around them. It's what we make them do and what the media make them do. And it's the people they have around them who are paranoid about how something is going to look. But I'm glad you said that because I've often felt it's the minister – Nicola Murray or Hugh Abbot or Peter Mannion – who are actually kind of decent. They're not corrupt. And they're sort of trying to make the system work and if it weren't for all the people telling them to do this and that, they'd get by.

**H:** Did you find there was a different dynamic going on there when you came to write about American politics in *Veep*?

**AI:** Well in *The Thick of It* you have a small, powerless ministry, controlled by other people. They have no money, no influence. They're at the bum end of Westminster. But in *Veep* Selina Meyer is the Vice-President. It's high office, high stakes. Yes, it's a frustrating office to have, but it's still one heartbeat away from the Presidency. So it's enormous, and it means that everything she does has consequences. Having said that, the Constitution is such that it's a very frustrating position because, unless you have Congress on your side, you're slightly limited. Plus, you know, people also treat you differently. Even if they hate you, people are going to show you respect. When you're the President you're the Head of State. You're essentially like the Queen. You couldn't have someone like a Malcolm Tucker coming in and swearing at her because he'd be arrested. That just doesn't happen with the President.

**H:** Did you find when you were filming the show that there's a much closer link between show business and politics in America?

**AI:** Washington is a bit like Los Angeles. They're sort of one job towns. LA being very showbiz, everyone is obsessed with showbiz and who's in magazines and movies and the gossip is all about whatever the CEO of Time Warner is doing that week. And they assume the whole world is equally interested in those stories. Similarly when you go to Washington, everyone knows everyone else, whether you're in government or not. Everyone is there talking about senators and who they've hired and what it means. But outside of that town most people aren't especially interested in those conversations. But there is this connection too between politics and showbiz. You know, they love it in Washington. We went to the White House Correspondents dinner and they love seeing television people.

**H:** Have you seen any of Season 5? I know you're not writing for it now.

**AI:** Nope. I just thought if someone else is taking over then they need to take over. People working there need to know that they're in charge. If I'm hanging around I'd want to get involved. Also when we ended Season 4 on the electoral tie, that was my ending. I would have happily just left it there.

**H:** Perhaps we're not there with *Veep* because I'm sure the new series is going to be great, but do you think there's a tendency in the US for shows – even the great shows – to go on for one or two seasons too long? The notable exception I suppose being *Breaking Bad*.

**AI:** Because it stopped. It stopped after five and everyone knew it was going to stop, so there was no question of a petition for another season. And fair play to them for going back into that world and finding something else with *Better Call Saul*. I think a lot of shows that work are good because they have a sense of style or a high concept, but it's then prolonging that style – thinking of enough things to do that will fully use the concept – which can cause problems. But you know I'm not saying... there probably was a bit more life in *Veep* after four seasons but for me I just felt the practicalities of going backwards and forwards to America was just too much. It may just be coming from the British tradition. You know we never really do three or four series of something. So after four I felt I had taken it as far as I could take it. It now needs fresh blood to re-inject it with new ideas.

**H:** What are you moving on to?

**AI:** I'm working on a film. Fingers crossed because we're still putting it all together, but it's a film about the death of Stalin. It's a dark comedy set around the night that he has his stroke. No one went into his room because he had said not to wake him up, so he lay there for a week and eventually his housekeeper found him. It's about living under constant fear, and what happens when the guy who is at the centre of this web of fear disappears. So we've been out to Moscow and I've done a lot of reading and research into what actually happened. It'll be a strange and funny story but a lot of it will be based on true events.

**H:** So just to finish, do you have a favourite piece of managerial jargon you could share with us?

**AI:** Oh, you mean from *The Thick of It*? Or just generally? I've always liked 'moving forward'. Because, you know, all that really means is just, well... *next*.

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