



Interview

Noel Fielding: 'Everything Salvador Dalí did was funny'

Stuart Jeffries

The comedian stars as one of his heroes, goth-rocker Alice Cooper, in Sky's latest Urban Myths romp - so why did he pitch to play its other lead character, the clown prince of surrealism?

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Noel Fielding was born, or so you'd think, to play Alice Cooper. The eyeliner, the dangling black locks, the camped-up goth vibe, the way the comedian and *Bake Off* host dresses more outlandishly than anyone in any room, with the possible exception of Prue Leith.

Cooper has long been one of Fielding's heroes. His parents were fans and inducted their son into the rock musician's oeuvre, perhaps even instilling into little Noel the subversive philosophy of Cooper's *School's Out*. "I love his music. He was a punk before punk."

THE ADVENTURES OF ALICE AND NOEL



The Adventures of Alice and Noel, from the Guardian's Guide, 2012. Illustration: Noel Fielding

And then one day, Cooper appeared as a guest on the pop quiz show *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*, on which Fielding was a team captain. Their relationship blossomed. "He invited me to his show and then I did a cartoon strip about him in the *Guardian*." He also interviewed his hero for the paper.

So when Fielding went to audition for a role in a new drama for Sky Arts' *Urban Myths* series about the time the glam rocker met the venerable shock artist Salvador Dalí, Fielding was a shoo-in to play Cooper. But he had other ideas. He suggested to directors Jane Pollard and Iain Forsyth he should play Dalí. "I mean, both Alice and Dalí are heroes to me, but Dalí has been important to me since I saw a painting of his with a burning giraffe in the background. When I was aged 12, I just went: 'This is it for me.' And I went to art school because of that."

But you grew up to become not an artist, but a comedian? "Yeah, but Dalí's a comedian as well. Everything he does is funny, for shock. He's the most ridiculous man played straight." And in any case, Fielding has never quite set aside his artistic chops. The comedian has held a number of different exhibitions, including *The Jelly Fox*, a video installation shown at the Saatchi Gallery in London in 2012. Fielding is, in many respects, the Salvador Dalí of British comedy.

Understandably, the directors wouldn't countenance casting Fielding as Dalí when they had as surefire a lookalike as Cooper. Instead, they sent him away for six weeks to research the Cooper role. He was assigned a voice coach to make his stab at Cooper's flat, Michigan accent more convincing. "It is scary playing someone you know. You don't want to let him down."

We're chatting in Fielding's dressing room at Pinewood Studios between shots for the new drama, *The Dalí and the Cooper*. Fielding, wearing a prosthetic nose, tells me he was mollified when he found out who'd been cast to play Dalí. "I love David Suchet. I'm obsessed with Poirot. Then I saw him in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where he did Lady Bracknell and he was amazing - he did it like a dinosaur, like a velociraptor.

"I was very nervous because I was thinking, him and Sheila Hancock" - who plays Dalí's 79-year-old wife, muse and manager Gala Dalí - "they're big actors who've got a lot of experience. And I'm learning how to be an actor." Suchet gave him some helpful tips about watching footage of Cooper from the early 1970s. "David said watch him with the sound down. Then you've got nothing but the body language."



Noel Fielding and Sandi Toksvig, left, with judges Paul Hollywood and Prue Leith on Channel 4's *The Great British Bake Off*. Photograph: Channel 4/PA

We meet on the day in March last year when it was announced that Fielding and Sandi Toksvig would replace Mel and Sue in Channel 4's retool of *The Great British Bake Off*. "I know it's odd - I look like a goth - but I think it's quite an inspired choice," says Fielding. Yet even Fielding - no stranger to fame - admits to being blindsided by the fuss. He didn't go home last night to elude the media scrum. "I forgot it was such a big show. My phone's on fire."

His PR agent has been scrambled to Pinewood to make sure Fielding talks about Cooper rather than, presumably, blabbing nuggets about his nascent rapport with *Bake Off*'s mahogany tiger, Paul Hollywood. "I'm not allowed to talk about it," he says. "I like the show and I like Sandi Toksvig, so I thought it would be fun." Given all the media rumpus, it's astounding he can keep his head in the game.

The Dalí and the Cooper riffs on the day in 1973 when Cooper comes off stage during his *Billion Dollar Babies* tour to be told by his manager Shep Gordon (the superb Paul Kaye) that Dalí is in that night's crowd. "Well, if that gives you wood, drop your kimono and get ready

for the happy ending, kemosabe, because the D-Man wants to work with you.” Such, at least, is how comedy writers Roger Drew and Ed Dyson, who worked on *The Thick of It* and *Veep*, imagine the conversation.



Waiting for the D-Man ... Noel Fielding as Cooper and Paul Kaye as his manager Shep Gordon in *Urban Myths*. Photograph: Sky UK Limited

What the D-Man wants to do, it turns out, is to make Cooper the subject of his latest artwork. But there is a problem. Gala Dalí refuses to pay this American oik for the privilege. Shep is a tough businessman (he wears a T-shirt emblazoned “No head. No backstage pass”), but even Shep’s lurid professional backstory ill-prepares him for professional dealings with this woman whom he pegs as a ball-buster. Gala tells Shep she was once in a threesome with Paul Éluard and Max Ernst but neither could satisfy her. Hancock clearly revels in this role.

While Shep and Gala wrangle over the money, the Dalí and the Cooper meet. As Suchet’s Dalí shoots Fielding’s Cooper, who’s half naked and clutching props such as a brain capped with an éclair over which crawl some ants, the two men discuss what it is to be an artist. Dalí can’t quite believe that his subject is not Alice Cooper all the time, but is developing a fond relationship with something usually frowned upon by surrealist artists and rock’n’rollers, namely golf. Unlike Dalí, Cooper isn’t always on.

Fielding grasps why the character he plays left his madness on stage. “He knew Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Keith Moon and Harry Nilsson and they all died. He worked out that he couldn’t be that character off stage. And that’s kept him in good stead, I think. In the days playing golf, and in the evening cutting his own head off with a guillotine. What a life!”



The Dalí and the Cooper. Photograph: Sky UK

What makes Fielding's performance so compelling is that he's channelling something of his twentysomething self. "In this Alice is 24 and Dalí's 69, so Alice is trying to hold his own. He's a huge rock star and he's quite cocky. He's like me when I was doing the Boosh and we were doing arenas. Not cocky in a horrible way, but you're just sure of yourself because you're, like, 20,000 people came tonight - you've got a spring in your step. You're not really old enough to realise that's only going to last for so long."

Fielding's greatest fame came in his 20s when he and Julian Barratt starred in the surrealist comedy *The Mighty Boosh*. The characters he created then - flamboyant zookeeper Vince Noir, a Cockney hitchhiker and hermaphroditic merman Old Greg - are remembered fondly by fans. "People keep asking me if the Boosh is coming back and I say I hope so. I'm not bothered people ask me about it. TV's become quite disposable, so to make something that lasts a bit of time - it won't last forever - is quite nice."

As for the *Urban Myths* directors, they were trying to create a piece of TV that looks like the era run which the drama is set. "We had a rule book," says Jane Pollard. "We would only use tech devices we could have used in 1973. So there's no screen, all the effects are in camera." This kind of self-denying ordinance is of a piece with their use of music. "It would have been so easy to have put in some Alice Cooper music." So why didn't you? "Because he wouldn't have been listening to Alice Cooper." Instead, they commissioned Jarvis Cocker to write the soundtrack, which he performed with Richard Hawley.

Back in his dressing room, Noel Fielding gets the call. Despite the prosthetic nose and the lavish eyeliner, they need him in make up sharpish. He toddles off obligingly on high heels, but not before I ask him one last question. Has playing Alice Cooper given you an insight into how to mellow? “Maybe. I mean I’m on Bake Off - now I might start playing golf. “ He is, please God, kidding.

Urban Myths: The Dalí and the Cooper is on Sky Arts on 3 May.

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