

“I love Christmas, I’m a sucker for goodwill”

Comedian **Ricky Gervais** admits he’s a bit of a cry baby when it comes to the festive season. He tells Maxine Clayman how Christmas-morning TV, and even **Kermit the frog**, reduce him to tears

Twas the night before Christmas and all eyes were upon the eight-year-old choirboy. Dressed in his long, white frilly surplice he was petrified that he would go off-key when he sang his solo. But, as the organ music came in, he cast aside his nerves and sang his heart out to *Once In Royal David’s City*. It’s this memory of his youth that reminds Ricky Gervais of Christmas. ‘Other kids couldn’t wait for Christmas Eve,’ he laughs. ‘But I was panicking about hitting the wrong note. It was traumatic but I loved singing in church. The echo was incredible and the hymns were full of the most beautiful chords.’

This was the first taste of fame for Ricky who, after a brief stint as a pop star in a 1980s group called Seona Dancing, went on to create and star in the hit TV shows *The Office* and *Extras*.

The youngest of four children Ricky, 46, grew up on a Reading council estate. He now lives in London with his partner, TV producer Jane Fallon. They met at university and have been

together for 20 years. He still visits his siblings over the festive season but Christmas Day itself is spent with Jane.

‘Even though it’s just us, by ourselves in London, I still get up at six in the morning all excited,’ he says. ‘We open our presents and I sit down with a gin and tonic, watching Noel Edmonds going round to hospitals, giving presents to kids and it makes me cry. *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, with Kermit and his nephew Robin as Tiny Tim, makes me cry too. I’m a sucker for goodwill and I love what Christmas does to people.’

‘It’s a shame people can’t be like that all year round but I realise that this is real life and Noel can’t be visiting hospitals every day, for goodness sake, he’s got *Deal Or No Deal* to do.’

Although Ricky’s family weren’t well off his parents ensured that none of the four children ever went without, especially when it came to Christmas and presents.

‘It was never about money in our house,’





remembers Ricky. 'Christmas was the time for having the family round. Besides, when I was a kid, you would have thought we were rich as my mum would buy everyone what they wanted from a catalogue. She then spent the rest of the year paying for it, which, embarrassingly, I never realised until I was about 16.

'When I was five I was convinced I'd seen Santa,' he laughs. 'So I kept really quiet because I was told if I saw him I wouldn't get my presents. Of course it was my dad, not the real Santa.

'My favourite Christmas present ever was Subbuteo. It was brilliant and I still have it now. But when I first got it I couldn't reach up to the table so I didn't get a look in. Every Christmas Day my brothers and sister and I would watch *Top Of The Pops* at 2pm.'

Talking to Ricky he appears to have no airs and graces. What you see is what you get. Surely with a string of accolades including the fastest selling British comedy tour in history, *Fame*, two Golden Globes, six BAFTAs, and two Emmies, it would be easy for him to let fame go to his head?

'I work with Steve Merchant my writing partner, I live with Jane and I surround myself with family and friends. Trust me, they don't tell me how brilliant I am,' he laughs.

'Of course I like the nice reviews and the awards. Who wouldn't? But it can all get a bit embarrassing. I always play it with a mock arrogance, tongue in cheek. But now some people think I'm actually like that, so I can't win.'

'But apart from being able to afford more things I haven't changed my habits. You can see I don't spend money on clothes,' he laughs, clad in his trademark T-shirt and jeans. 'I don't have a gambling problem or a drug problem. We don't have kids and I don't go in for bling.

'I don't sit back and think I deserve to earn silly amounts of money. Doing so made me feel guilty at first. And I didn't go into the industry because I wanted to be famous. The fact I'll be recognised walking out of a chip shop doesn't excite me in the slightest. If someone said to me you can

either work hard and do *The Office* or win *Pop Idol* and the Lottery at the same time I'd do *The Office*. I'm really lucky to do a job I really enjoy that allows me to have a laugh and be creative.'

Ricky acknowledges Christmas has changed since he lost his mum, Eva, to lung cancer seven years ago. His dad, Jerry, died a few years later.

'You can have the best life in the world and it all means nothing if you haven't got your health,' he says. 'It's a real working-class male preserve not to go to the doctors. But if I get the slightest illness I think I'm going to die. I'll imagine a pimple is a mole – I'll show Jane and she'll tell me to get it seen to and I'll think, "If it's a pimple why do I need to?" I want her to tell me not to

worry. After my mum died I twice thought I'd found a lump. Luckily it was nothing, but it scares you. It's better to be safe than sorry.

'I'm relatively healthy. I eat and drink too much but don't smoke, and I wear sunblock. Patting his waist he says, 'I work out every day which surprises people but imagine what I'd look like if I didn't. I do it so that I can live longer and eat more cheese. Being in the public eye hasn't

made me more conscious of my appearance. I'd lose roles if I lost weight. And I'm never going to be the action hero, or the romantic lead but I can be the slightly fat English one with the funny teeth.'

This year has been phenomenal for Ricky. His sell-out, stand-up tour *Fame* is out on DVD this Christmas, along with a feature-length Christmas special of *Extras*. And next year will see his first lead role in the Hollywood film *Ghost Town*. So there's only one thing he wants this year.

'My Christmas wish is for all my family to remain in good health. For me, Christmas is a celebration of family and friends. Everyone together, not looking at your watch thinking that you have to dash off. Christmas is about spending time with the people you love.'

Ricky Gervais' *Fame* is available on DVD from Monday, 12 November 2007

'Noel Edmonds going round hospitals giving kids presents and *The Muppet Christmas Carol* make me cry'

Ricky's reader questions

Q You played David Brent in *The Office*. Who's the worst boss you've ever had?

Tom, 26

A I wouldn't stand for a bad boss, life's too short to be held to ransom. I'd rather be poor and happy than rich and stressed.

Q You've been with your girlfriend Jane for 20 years. Do you plan to get married?

Nicky, 39

A To all intents and purposes we are. We've got the will, the deeds – we just don't have the toasters. It's not that we don't believe in marriage we just don't see the point.

Q Are you a morning person?

Lisa, 23

A I need my sleep. I don't like getting up early – I'm not a student so I don't get up for *Countdown* – I get up at 9.30am. But if I'm filming I have to get up around seven so I'll be in bed by 9.30pm.

Q Who's going to be in *The Extras' Christmas Special* and will there be any more?

Jackie, 33

A Clive Owen, George Michael, Gordon Ramsay, Lionel Blair and lots more. There's also a *Dr Who* scene. It's going to be like a feature length movie and I'm proud of it, but it will be the last *Extras*.