

Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em – Interviews



With Joe Pasquale

Joe Pasquale on being Frank Spencer, living dangerously and a naughty on-stage habit...

What can people expect from the stage show of Some Mothers Do 'Av 'Em?

Proper family comedy that is set in the 70s and is so funny that you will laugh solidly for two hours.

In the original TV series, there were a lot of crazy stunts. How about the stage show?

I'm doing it all – hanging by my ankles, chicken chasing and all sorts. If it's not dangerous or life threatening, I'm not interested anymore.

Michael Crawford is inexorably linked with the character of Frank Spencer.

Will you be imitating his performance?

No. That would be an insult to Michael. I will be projecting my own personality on to the role. When we did the final workshop, we had an invited audience. All the younger people didn't know the show or have a frame of reference with

Michael, but they laughed their socks off. Even the older people who remember the original forgot Michael doing it in within five minutes – the script is so good.

Do you find touring life tiring?

Touring in *Some Mothers* will be a lot easier than my stand-up show, when a tour is usually forty one-nighters. A week in one place will be like a holiday.

Got any nicknames?

Sarah Earnshaw who plays Frank's wife Betty calls me The Unstoppable Moron.

What's your most unappealing habit?

I am terrible for farting onstage.

What's your philosophy for life?

Feel the fear and do it anyway. You're a long time dead; you might as well live while you can.

With Director Guy Unsworth

Too young to have seen *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* during its heyday of the 1970s, Guy is nevertheless a huge fan of Raymond Allen's classic TV sitcom.

"I saw re-runs and I love it; the slapstick, the situations and the character of Frank, who is one of the great British underdogs. We sort of want him to fail because it is funny when he does, but we root for him to succeed too. Frank has the energy and loyalty of a Labrador puppy combined with the morals of his late overprotective mother,"

Working together on *Spamalot* in the West End two years ago, Guy recalls how actor and comedian Joe Pasquale blew up an electric fan in a bid to mend it. Inadvertently creating a moment that was straight out of *Some Mothers* (a BANG! followed by the smell of singed hair and a look of electrified bewilderment on Joe's face), the idea for Joe to play Frank in a stage version was born and Guy and Joe joined forces to drive the project forwards.

Writing the script was a particular privilege for Guy, who after studying Industrial Economics at the University of Nottingham won the Directors Guild of Great Britain award for Best New Director. Following postgraduate training

and the mentorship of leading theatre directors on numerous productions in the West End and at the Royal Shakespeare Company, he is now regarded as one of Theatre's brightest young talents. A huge fan of British comedy and with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject, Guy says that he had clear ideas about the *Some Mothers* stage play from the outset.

"I was very keen that it shouldn't just be a re-run of old episodes, so it is based on a particular point in Frank's life, when Betty was trying to tell him she is pregnant. I knew it had to be something written specifically for the stage - something that would work in a theatre. What we have now is quite a traditional British farce, with surprises. It is two hours in real time, set one evening when they are expecting people for dinner. Chaos ensues!" he teases, refusing to give more away.

Agreeing that there seems to have been a developing trend for theatrical comedies in recent times, Guy explains why that might be. "We've spent a lot of time in the last few years discussing what we shouldn't be laughing at. Watching something that makes us laugh and feel warm is a reaction to that, I think."

And with Joe playing the hapless Frank it seems that laughter is guaranteed.

"I loved working with Joe on *Spamalot*. He's just a fantastic spirit in a room; such a hard worker and great natural comedian, but also a technician. He, I'm glad to say, likes working with me too. I wouldn't do this without him," says Guy, confirming that Joe's Frank won't be a carbon copy of Michael Crawford's original character.

"Michael was brilliant; iconic. It is difficult to imagine another Frank Spencer, so it needed somebody who was really going to make Frank their own. Joe is perfect. Interestingly, the role of Frank was originally offered to Norman Wisdom before Michael Crawford. Norman was 57 at the time, so while Joe is older than Michael, he's not as old as Norman was when he was considered for the part."

With an impressive and diverse CV, I'm curious to know what other ambitions Guy might be harbouring.

"I grew up in Southport, Lancashire, and I was lucky to have a popular theatre close to home. I don't come from a politics background or an English literature

background, but from a love of theatre and, specifically, watching theatre. It doesn't matter what; Shakespeare or a brand new comedy, it's about the quality for me. Entertainment has developed a slightly negative connotation in recent years, but it used to be a treat and that's what I feel it should be; a great night out."

Certainly, *Some Mothers* sounds like it ticks that box, and joining Joe will be Susie Blake as Mrs Fisher, Frank's disapproving mother-in-law, Moray Treadwell as Mr Luscombe, David Shaw-Parker as Father O'Hara and Chris Kiely as Desmond. Playing Frank's long-suffering wife Betty is Joe's *Spamalot* co-star Sarah Earnshaw.

"Box office ratings at panto time show us that family entertainment is popular, so I'm glad we are doing something that everyone can enjoy together. We live in a divided world in many ways and theatre is a chance for different groups of people to come together and experience something at the same time. With Netflix and TV 'on demand' we never really sit down and watch something together. I love that electric feeling you get when a theatre is full and the show is about to start," says Guy, laughing at my suggestion that he could write more 70s sitcoms as stage shows – *Terry and June* the musical, perhaps?

"Not quite yet! These shows take a long time to develop. We said early on that we wanted time to get *Some Mothers* right and it really has been a labour of love. We are devoted to it."

With tickets selling faster than Frank Spencer on roller skates, the mood music suggests the show will amass new devotees at every performance of every date of the six-month national tour.

"People should come because it is a great celebration of that period of time for all the family. It's got some great 70s music in it and is simply a feel-good, funny and nostalgic trip to the theatre with a really great cast," urges Guy.

He says something else, but I'm not listening; I'm diverted by choosing seats online to see my favourite childhood TV show brought brilliantly to life on stage. Then the website crashes. Ooh! I've got a bit of trouble...

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