

Ding dong DJALILI

Omid Djalili is bringing his new tour, Iranalamadingdong, to Surrey this month. Kiran Sidhu caught up with the thoughtful comedian

Omid Djalili – actor, writer, producer and comic – is known for his astute political observations and for boldly bringing them into the comedy domain.

Surprising to learn, therefore, that it was only when Omid participated in the ITV show, *Splash*, in 2013, that he believes he found courage.

He credits the show and his training with Olympic diver Tom Daley for his belief in positive thinking.

"As you get older, to have a positive mindset becomes very challenging," he admits candidly. "But thanks to *Splash*, I now have the courage not to talk simply about terrorism, but to include other topics in my repertoire."

On his new tour, with its tongue-twister title – *Iranalamadingdong* – Omid discusses getting older, marriage and celebrity – topics that seem innocuous compared to his usual sharp political commentary.

In fact, however, he describes this tour as his most daring yet. He's even discussed a topic so taboo that no comedian has dared bring it into the comic domain.

"I set myself a challenge, whereby I had to experience this for myself. I understand that to see it as comedy is really difficult for some," he says mysteriously.

Off-stage, indeed, the subject remains strictly off-limits. To discover what it is, says Omid, I will have to come to the show.

So far, he says, the secret topic has divided his audiences, but he is philosophical about his role as a comedian. It is not always his job to please, he insists firmly.

"A part of me thinks that, if you're not offending someone somewhere, you're not doing your job as a comedian. You're there to challenge, though not in a childish way. We just need to be challenged as a society."

Despite Omid's high-energy persona and outlandishness, he comes across as less anarchic and more considered than I'd expected.

"I think that now, because I'm not so needy, there are longer periods without laughs from the audience, but when you do get them, they are deeper," he reflects. "And that's the laugh you chase because the pay-off is bigger."

Omid gamely reads every review – a habit installed in him during his days on the comedy circuit in Edinburgh. It's the best way to get feedback, he says. But he is also notorious for calling up any reviewer who – in his admittedly biased opinion – takes unjustified swipes at his show.

Now living in Sheen, near Richmond, Omid finds that he is often recognised. It's not something that bothers him, as most people are nice, though he does become frustrated when people stop and ask him to perform the Iranian dance sketch for which he is famed.

"As you can see, I'm not a silly person," he says, clearly exasperated at being asked to entertain like a performing monkey. It's a phenomenon, I suggest, that stems from the illusion of celebrity, whereby the public feels a level of ownership towards the stars.

Omid has his own theory on the cult of celebrity. He thinks it goes back to our childhood.

"Among kids, someone's always the prettiest, or the best sportsman. Someone is the celebrity. Then you grow

up, leave school and go to university; you go onto Facebook and Twitter. And, of course, you want to know who is the most successful now.

"You want to observe. Do those accorded the status of being the prettiest, or the most successful, abuse their good fortune? Do they feel better than us? And the moment we sense that they do, we want them to fail."

As Djalili is honest enough to admit, there was a time when he himself fell prey to delusions of grandeur.

"As soon as I had a TV show and everyone thought it was great, I started to believe my own hype. There's a period when you tend to become an arse – and I certainly did," he says.

Omid has won a plethora of prizes, including the *Emma*

Award and the *Time Out* award for his stand-up. As a well-established performer, does he still crave such laurels?

"On the one hand they don't really matter, as people will know when something is good. Even now though, I would love to get an award for something! If ever I'm nominated, I'm there. I'm never the kind of person that can't be bothered – even for the most modest award."

Omid, it seems to me, is a man who has the balance right. Aware of the pitfalls of fame, he is nevertheless not so much of a star as to remain dispassionate about winning awards – irrespective of who wants to give them.

■ New Victoria, Woking (March 1);
G Live, Guildford (March 20);
omidnoagenda.com

