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MORE OF A WOMAN

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From Eddie to Sexie by design

It took two fashionistas, a personal trainer, a girl walking up the Holloway Road and absolutely no potatoes to hone comedian Eddie Izzard's new image. It's ideal, he tells Sharon Krum . . . almost

If you can ignore his fingernails, which he has painted a bright cherry red, the preferred colour of pin-ups and vamps, Eddie Izzard could be the heterosexual next door. Dressed in the classic guy uniform of black shirt and blue jeans, he certainly sounds like your standard lad when confessing, most enthusiastically, that his two greatest loves are football and female breasts. No need to check this man's testosterone levels.

And yet Izzard is not your average lad, as his fingernails silently suggest. He is the world's only comic transvestite. "My sexuality is straight transvestite or male lesbian," he says, explaining that he has thought carefully about the terminology he uses. "It seems that we are beyond the idea I am gay and hiding it."

He is simply, he insists, a straight man who likes dressing as a woman but is simultaneously wildly attracted to them. "If I had to describe how I feel in my head, I'd say I'm a complete boy plus half a girl. I don't seem to have the sixth sense that women have or their stronger senses of taste and smell. Gay men can also have it but straight men don't."

Where his psyche does intersect with the female sex is at the corner of Fashion Street and Lipstick Road. "I can have fantastic conversations with women about clothing and make-up, the external areas of girlhood, because I completely share their interest in it. So I have the fun, sexy, let's-go-dress-up part of being a woman in me but not the rest."

At the age of 41, after more than a decade of experimenting with a female persona — he knew he was a transvestite at four but only performed as one at 30 — Izzard says he is finally approaching his ideal of himself as a woman.

"I certainly feel I am more defined about it. Initially, when you come out as a transvestite, if you are very blokey, to express your female side you go to extremes." And he did, experimenting with garish make-up and loud clothes before retreating to build a persona that is more rock chick than frills and pearls.

"I don't do drag," he says, emphatically. "Drag is about glamour, pearls, wigs, sequins and that's not where I am. What I am doing is much edgier." And this is where the British fashion designer Russell Sage, often described as the king of customising, and his co-designer



'I FANCY WOMEN, SO CHANGING SEX WOULD MEAN BECOMING A LESBIAN'

Charlotte Mann step in. It is they who have given Izzard his much wanted female edge, kitting him out in blood-red bustiers, black miniskirts, fishnet tights, satin gloves and leather boots for the Sexie tour.

"I used to buy off the peg," he says of his stage wardrobe. "But I had been looking for a designer for some time to really perfect the look I was going for."

Which is? "Action transvestite. Somewhat military, somewhat action girl; Lara Croft by way of Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. And, of course, that look doesn't really exist because if you are a gay transvestite you tend to be more drag queen, more über-girlie, and that's not me.

"My style is more feisty. I said to both Russell and Charlotte, I know this is off the map but let's do it." He then wraps his hand around one thigh. "I fought for the mini-skirt because there are certain bits of my body that do ring 'girlie'; so I said let's work with those. And my thighs are now pretty good because I have lengthened them out."

And not without considerable effort. After a lifetime of doing little exercise beyond playing football, Izzard got serious about reshaping his body two years ago. The motivation, he admits,

was a mixture of improving his health and sharpening the silhouette of his body in women's clothes. And if you are 5ft 7in and quite solid, this resolution requires commitment. Which Izzard has.

On the Sexie tour — which has taken him to Australia, New Zealand, the US and now the UK — he has been touring for the first time with a trainer. His workout routine consists of an hour of running, often followed by weight training and crunches to slenderise his waist. "Lean and lithe are the two places I am trying to get to. Seeing as I am fairly blokey-looking, with a broad chest, if I am going to get into what people consider girls' clothing, I need to go for lean in the torso department."

The end result of all this sweating, along with a diet that now steers clear of carbs (potatoes, bread and rice are out) and dairy, is that Izzard, who cites Marilyn Monroe as his ideal woman, can now feel his ribs and see a waistline. "I certainly feel the difference in my body and in the way clothes fit."

Yet the one thing that all the push-ups in the world won't give Izzard is breasts, which is ironic considering it's the body part he covets most. "I definitely have breast-envy. When teenage girls were saying, 'I wish I had breasts', I was thinking the same thing."

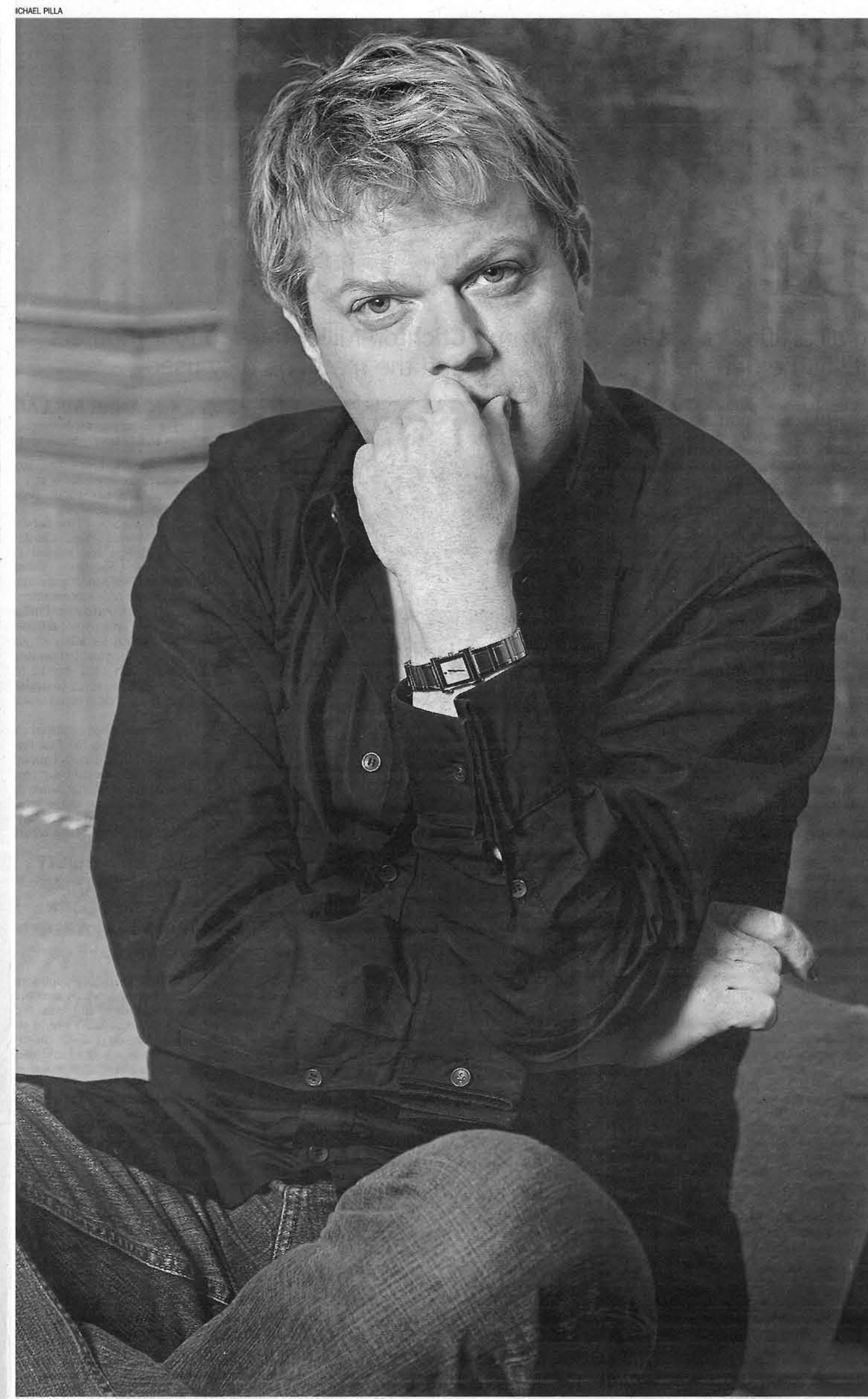
When in "girlie" mode Izzard dons prosthetic breasts, custom-made for him in Los Angeles. He claims wearing them makes him feel more feminine and completes his look. The prospect of securing a permanent pair via sex change, once contemplated, has now been abandoned.

"I did consider it, but I am not going to do it because I think I would look like a boy who had changed sex. If I looked more girlie I might have already done it. Besides, I fancy women, so changing sex would mean becoming a lesbian."

Women spend a lifetime perfecting their images and Izzard admits that starting late meant learning to put on make-up from books, while studying women for cues on how to walk and sit.

"When I first came out, I thought, I want to walk like a real woman, I don't want to do mincing steps. And there was some girl I saw walking up Holloway Road in Islington who had this long languid walk and I thought, that's what I like, so I incorporated her walk into mine."

Izzard says he understands some audiences



A hard act to follow: "I can go from blokey to girlie in 15 minutes. But that's the fastest I can do"

see a man performing in a skirt and high heels and assume all the gags will be about alternate sexuality. "They think it's all going to be, Two lipsticks walk into a bar . . . that sort of thing."

Yet apart from one joke drawing parallels between superheroes and transvestites — "Both have to change clothes in order to help people. Only thing is, transvestites don't help people." — Izzard's comedy has nothing to do with his look and everything to do with hilarious riffs on Greek mythology — "I wonder what happens when Medusa goes to the hairdresser?" — and modern history. This is intentional on his part.

The more he emphasises that dressing as a woman is incidental to his work, the more people will accept him as a transvestite who is also a comic and an actor rather than a performer dependent on the titillation of his transvestitism to attract an audience.

"What I want people to understand is this isn't an act. This is an intrinsic part of who I am. I wear girlie stuff on the street, not just on stage."

'I CERTAINLY FEEL THE DIFFERENCE IN MY BODY AND THE WAY MY CLOTHES FIT'

Curiously, Izzard's biggest fans are not cross-dressing gay men but straight women. He blushes to the shade of his fingernails when you mention it. "It's great, isn't it," he grins. More than a few have come on to him and he admits he has thought much about why.

"Well, you could say I have fame and, maybe, they hate all the make-up and clothes and are just into the fame thing — but it doesn't add up. I think women are really positive on it because the place that I am trying to come at is the place where girl meets boy."

A place, incidentally, that takes a mere quarter of an hour to get to. "I can go from blokey to girlie in 15 minutes and then I'm out the door," he says of his metamorphosis from blue jeans to blue skirt. "But that's the fastest I can do. Becoming a woman takes work."

Eddie Izzard will be appearing in the nationwide sell-out Sexie tour from December 11

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