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Gently does it for Stephen Mangan



Stephen Mangan as Dirk Gently BBC/ITV STUDIOS

“It’s fairly unique. It’s a detective show that isn’t *Cracker* or *Miss Marple*, peopled with very odd events and odd characters. It goes to places where no other show reaches.” So says Stephen Mangan about *Dirk Gently*, an adaptation of the Douglas Adams novels about the adventures of a self-styled “holistic detective”.

In the hour-long show, based on the two books written by the beloved *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* author in the late 1980s, the eccentric and hapless investigator gets a job trying to track down a missing cat, and, with the help of his sidekick MacDuff (Darren Boyd, who appeared with Mangan in the comedy series *Green Wing*), unravels a plot involving a time machine and a devious granny. Although it is a one-off, the show, and particularly the hilarious interplay from Mangan and Boyd, begs for a full-length series.

“I think we would all be happy if the BBC rang up and said ‘can we have a 75-part series?’,” Mangan says, relaxing in the BBC canteen after the frenetic two-week shoot. “I would be pretty heartbroken if we didn’t get to do more.”

How does Mangan feel about the internet boards buzzing with Douglas Adams aficionados, saying he is not right for the role. “I no longer get involved or read those things,” he says, grinning. “Mostly because I know how I will react.

I could read 99 glowing and warm comments, and one person could say something negative and I’d be upset for a week.” Some have suggested Mangan simply doesn’t look enough like how they imagine Dirk to be. “He is described as fat in the book, and I’m not, so there you go. I think it’s testament to how loved the books are that people feel so proprietorial towards them. But I think most people would be smart enough to realise that they have to be quite radically adapted for television. Someone has to have the balls to make it their own and the talent to do it well.”

That someone is the scribe of the moment Howard Overman (*Merlin* and *Misfits*), who has done a terrific job of capturing the nutty spirit of Dirk Gently’s character without being beholden to slavishly recreating the novels.

“If you look at the history of the *Hitchhiker* books it’s been hard to put those onscreen and it hasn’t always been successful,” Mangan says. “You’re always going to upset people. The more hardcore a following you have the more people will be affected.”

It’s not the first time Mangan has risked the ire of fanatical readers. “I played Adrian Mole years ago. It’s almost harder than playing a real life person because they’re almost real, because they are so vividly drawn. But it’s not like Michael Sheen playing Tony Blair — you don’t have a real person to base it on, it’s all in everyone’s minds, and everyone thinks of those characters differently.”

While the fate of Dirk hangs in the balance, Mangan is appearing with another *Green Wing* cohort, Tamsin Grieg, and a certain Matt Le Blanc, in the forthcoming comedy series *Episodes*, written by *Friends* creator David Crane, and Jeffrey Klarik (*Mad About You*). “It’s about a British couple who have a hit show in the UK that stars Richard Griffiths as a headmaster— a sort of *History Boys*-type show set in a boarding school. And the Americans love everything about it and want to remake it. They go out to Los Angeles and they’re made to recast Griffiths with LeBlanc! It’s Crane and Klarik’s way of having fun at the insanity and the craziness of TV land out there.” Filming in LA — that beats the BBC canteen surely? “It’s all set in LA but we filmed it here actually,” Mangan says mock-solemnly. “I thought three months in beautiful sunshine. No, sat in Mill Hill in an open-topped sports car with a very thin shirt on trying to pretend it’s tropical when it’s actually freezing.” David Hayles *Dirk Gently*, Thursday, BBC Four, 9pm; *Episodes* is to be broadcast in the New Year